

# ***Female Characters Suffer from Sexual Violence in Zhang Yimou's Films: Their Images and Representations***

**Muhua Yang<sup>1\*</sup>, Yike Yang<sup>2</sup>, Kexin Wang<sup>3</sup>, Shiran Zhang<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Department of English, Nankai University, Tianjin, China*

<sup>2</sup>*London College of Communication, University of the Arts London, London, United Kingdom*

<sup>3</sup>*Nanjing Foreign Language School, Nanjing, China*

<sup>4</sup>*The Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China*

*\*Corresponding Author. Email: Muhuayang8000@163.com*

**Abstract:** In this paper, it provides a critical analysis of the portrayal of female characters experiencing sexual violence in Zhang Yimou's films, a prominent director known for his controversial depictions of women. It categorizes these characters into three distinct types: prostitutes, wives without abilities of self-protection, and women using sex for resistance. The paper examines the representation of these types across films such as *The Flowers of War* (2011), *Full River Red* (2023), *Article 20* (2024), *Coming Home* (1978), *Under the Light* (2023), and *JuDou* (1990), revealing a pattern where their victimization and resistance are often framed within male-dominated narratives. This paper argues that, despite their attempts to rebel and resist, these characters are sexualized in the films and remain confined within a patriarchal framework, thereby reinforcing rather than challenging gender stereotypes. The paper concludes with a call for a reevaluation of these cinematic portrayals, thus advocating for more complex and empowering depictions of women that transcend traditional narratives.

**Keywords:** Zhang Yimou, sexual violence, archetypes, filmic representation.

## **1. Introduction**

Film, as both an art form and cultural product, has the capacity to reflect and shape social realities, particularly in how it portrays gender dynamics and power structures. Despite the impact of cinema on societal attitudes, there remains a gap in Chinese scholarly discourse regarding the specific cinematic techniques and narrative strategies that contribute to the depiction of sexual violence against female characters. This gap is particularly relevant in the context of Zhang Yimou's films, which are celebrated for their visual storytelling but have also been criticized for their controversial portrayal of sexual violence and the objectification of women.

Zhang Yimou frequently utilizes the suffering of women's bodies as a means to explore broader socio-political narratives, aiming to reconstruct the fragmented histories of ordinary Chinese people across different eras. Jin argues that the physical suffering of women in Zhang's films serves as a symbolic vehicle for addressing collective historical and cultural struggles [1]. Some other scholars like M. M. Yang have also praised the subjectivity and resistance exhibited by female characters in Zhang's earlier films. It is true that Zhang has subverted the mediosilicic image of Chinese fourth generation, and have challenged the submissive character of traditional female [2]. However, Zhang himself has downplayed any feminist intentions. He clarified that his focus on female leads was

driven more by the traditional Chinese theater's preference for female characters rather than a deliberate feminist agenda [3][4]. Chow further notes that even though Zhang's female characters are initially depicted as strong-willed individuals, they are often reduced to visual objects that cater to the male gaze, aligning with Laura Mulvey's concept of women being positioned primarily as objects of visual pleasure [5][6]. This trend worsened as the pattern of female stories became repetitive in Zhang's late works as Yansenjiang Ma'tinniyaz also points out a regression in the portrayal of female consciousness in Zhang's films post-2010, with a shift towards an increased focus on the naked female body, which detracts from the complexity of his earlier characterizations [7].

Associating with the tradition of Chinese literature, Lu points out that Zhang Yimou has a film model which commodifies cultural products for the global market, often by exoticizing and feminizing Chinese narratives, particularly through the portrayal of oppressed women. Films like "Raise the Red Lantern" are critiqued for appealing to Western audiences by presenting Chinese women as exotic and victimized, reinforcing stereotypes and allowing Western viewers to engage with these narratives without confronting the realities of oppression [8].

By analyzing Zhang's representations, this paper aims to address the gap in research on the cinematic portrayal of sexual violence, exploring its broader implications on societal perceptions of gender and power. this paper aims to bridge the gap by specifically focusing on the depiction of sexual violence against women.

To further clarify, sexual violence refers to any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work [9]. Moreover, this form of violence is particularly insidious, as it is recognized as the most extreme, prototypical, and graphic form of oppression and mistreatment that women endure, acting as a symbol of gender-based violence. This violence is not only an individual tragedy but also a reflection of societal attitudes and norms that perpetuate gender inequality [10]. The issue of sexual violence has been a significant topic of discussion within the context of the UN's argument on women's safety. In the digital age, social norms are disseminated through digital platforms and inform the unwritten rules of gender-based behavior. The prevalence of negative content on the internet allows perpetrators of violence to fantasize widely and attempt to enact these fantasies in real life [11]. By analyzing the titles appearing on the the landing pages of the three most popular online pornography websites in the United Kingdom, scholars have found that sexual violence is a normative sexual script in mainstream online pornography. The representation of sexual violence on screen can influence societal perceptions of sexual pleasure and harm [12]. Moreover, some scholars believe that filming and presenting the process of sexual violence in film and television works or other media is the same as bullying of vulnerable female groups [13].

In this context, Zhang's extensive body of work provides multiple examples that delve into the complexities of female experience, making him an ideal subject for examining how sexual violence against women is depicted in cinema.

To support this analysis, this research identifies and examines three distinct patterns in Zhang's portrayal of female suffering: the depiction of "whores" as deserving of sexual violence, women who lack the ability for self-protection, and women who use their bodies as tools but remain trapped within patriarchal constraints. These patterns highlight how Zhang's cinematic techniques and narrative choices constrains the representation of female agency. His repetitive description of violence on female characters, especially sexual violence, is controversial.

It is hypothesized that the portrayal of female characters suffering sexual violence in Zhang Yimou's films not only sexualizes their suffering but also reinforces patriarchal narratives by limiting their capacity for agency, ultimately failing to challenge existing gender stereotypes.

Building on this analysis, this research identifies and analyses three patterns when it comes to sexual violence in Zhang's films: whores who are depicted as if they 'deserve' sexual violence, women who lack the ability of self-protection and can only wait for man's saving, and women use their bodies as weapons, however, they cannot put an end on the slavish pattern. These patterns, as identified by Vera-Gray etc., are perpetuated by the prevalence of negative content on the internet, which allows perpetrators of violence to fantasize widely and attempt to enact these fantasies in real life [12].

In these patterns, female bodies are subjected to extreme situations and are sexualized by the camera focusing on their harmed bodies, shown as landscape. Whores' miseries are rationalized by slut-shaming, which derives from both photography and the narrative logic, perpetuating the standard to distinguish women's morality by their sexual experience. Prostitutes are, as Foucault argues, used to set off the nobility of students (virgins).

The second group of female characters frequently subjected to sexual violence consists of those who are sexually assaulted and are powerless to defend themselves. Despite possessing the resolve and bravery to confront their ordeal, these characters are typically depicted as helpless during the scenes depicting the assault.

The third type is the most proactive type of the three types. It depicts how women come from the lower class selling their bodies to achieve a change in treatment or a leap in status. This kind of women are ambitious and unyielding, but the internalised patriarchal standard fail to lead them to liberty, but a disillusioning devastation.

The theoretical framework of this study draws upon feminist film theory, social norms theory, and the social-ecological model, offering a multi-dimensional approach to understanding how individual, relationship, community, and societal factors influence the portrayal of sexual violence. By applying Propp's theory of narrative structure, this research aims to analyze Zhang Yimou's approach to character development, examining how his narrative and visual choices systematically reinforce patriarchal themes [14].

Through this lens, the portrayal of female characters suffering from sexual violence in Zhang Yimou's films is re-examined to understand their implications in both Chinese cinematography and the broader cultural context. This study seeks to illuminate how Zhang's recurring images of violence against women influence the audience's perception of gender roles and contribute to the ongoing discourse on power dynamics in visual storytelling.

## **2. Images of female characters suffer from sexual violence**

### **2.1. Prostitutes: who "deserve" sexual violence**

In Zhang Yimou's films, the first type of female characters invariably suffer from sexual violence is whore, including sex workers and those who are labeled or stigmatized as such. Rather than focusing on their oppressed and precarious condition, these films often present their suffering as if it is somehow justified or inevitable, subtly implying that these women are "getting what they deserve."

The trick here relies on a historical strategy: slut shaming. It originates from the historical notion that women who arouse men's desires are dangerous and bring about chaos, evolving into a moral standard that judges women based on their sexual experiences. Studies on public opinion in China have shown that terms like 'slut' are frequently used to stigmatize female victims of sexual assault, reinforcing the idea that women who lack sexual exclusivity are morally corrupt [15]. This tactic diminishes and controls women's sexual value by labeling them as 'sluts' or 'whores,' equating their worth with their sexual history. "This type of shaming involves defining women with rich sexual experience as "sluts", and associating them with 'prostitutes' and 'whores,' thereby diminishing and controlling their sexual value " [16]. In Zhang Yimou's films, sexual violence against prostitutes is often rationalized through this lens of slut-shaming, suggesting that their suffering is justified because

they are perceived as having been 'paid for'. The most typical film of this type is *The Flower of War* (2011).

### 2.1.1. Sexualized photography

In *The Flowers of War*, the prostitutes' are represented as oversexualized images, characterized by nudity, top-down shot, voyeurism and lack of subjectivity, which deviates from the introspection of both history and the condition of women. The camera keeps tracing their body curves: The visual focus often lingers on their swaying hips, the meticulous details of them changing clothes; even when they are climbing over the church wall, the focus is on their thighs bound by garter belts. Those oversexualizations occupy significantly more screen and time space than in the original book, while the novel by Yan Geling employs a more metaphorical and suggestive description:

What happened to this leprechaun? Died in Gu's arms! The two plackets of the mink coat are completely open! The gray morning white light flashed, and a fleshy demon was exposed, like a pool of unfresh milk flowing out of the black mink [17].

The film, however, abandons this subtlety in favor of direct visual representation. Instead, the "leprechaun" collapses onto A Gu with her legs wide apart. Furthermore, the bodies are often seen from a voyeurism perspective by audience outside the film, and the characters within. As such, the prostitutes continue to exist as the erotic basis for pleasure in being looked at as object [5].

The high angle visual frame also contributes to the overall inferiority of the prostitutes. During their entrance, the students are depicted leaning in front of the stained glass windows of the church, with the colorful light casting a divine glow on their faces, creating an atmosphere of divinity. As the camera shifts to Shujuan's subjective perspective, it highlights her condescending gaze toward the prostitutes entering the church. The subsequent camera movement, shaking slightly as it pushes forward to capture the prostitutes against a backdrop of war-torn chaos, juxtaposing their secular, "impure" world with the students' perceived sanctity.

The contrast here is not only about height difference, but more importantly, the secularity in front of Marian divinity<sup>1</sup>. The scene's framing, though ostensibly elevating the students, in fact serves to underscore the stigmatisation and marginalisation of the prostitutes: Foucault argues in that societal norms and moral judgments are constructed through the exclusion and stigmatization of certain groups [18]. Due to the lack of concrete evidence to prove their own nobility, the students' sense of moral superiority can only be sustained by demeaning the lack of virtue in another group, by creating a lower standard. This emphasis on impurity is further underscored in the subsequent scene where the girls teasingly remark, "They are all from the red-light valley."

Finally, the prostitutes in the film are deprived of their subjectivity by being denied a subjective vision. Due to the operational mechanism of the film disguising the presence of the camera as the character's vision, 'the possession or deprivation of viewpoint and point-of-view shots becomes the visual counterpart to the possession or deprivation of the right to speak' [19]. When the prostitutes are being looked at, a panoramic, subjective shot is often used, with an advanced shot informing who the subject is, while an over-the-shoulder shot is more often employed when they look at others (e.g. when they are greeting John the camera captures their raised hands as the foreground, all wearing black gloves), thus keeping them perpetually under the gaze of others.

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<sup>1</sup> Refers to virginity, which will be discussed more detailly in the next part: Emphasis on Virginity.

### 2.1.2. Emphasis on virginity

Despite the visual stimuli, the adjusted plots and setting in the film have less attention on the final discussion of equal living and the war itself. The film selects the most sensual and catching part of the story, but the focus on fantasy diminishes the reflection of history.

The adapted plot implicitly links virginity with idealism. In the original story, the priest tells and asks the female students to remember the story of prostitutes who left the church and were gang-raped and killed; but the fake priest in the film choose to hide the truth from them, in order to protect their innocence. Using the same logic, the film changes Yumo's story from being sold by her family in exchange of money, to being raped by stepfather and then sent to a brothel, linking her misery to her lost of virginity.

The film also omits the conflict between the students and the prostitutes such as their competition for limited resources and the family history of the narrator Meng Shujuan whose father had an adultery with a prostitute. It simplifies the complicated situation and ascribe students's abhorrence to only one reason: that those prostitutes are "dirty".

In the climactic moment when the prostitutes decide to sacrifice themselves for the students, the cumulative effect of these subtle changes transforms what was originally an act of voluntary sacrifice into a coerced decision, because otherwise the students might commit suicide, and the prostitutes need to coax them down.

The persuasion from Yumo to other prostitutes also changed. From a discussion to destiny, life and value to a need of self-provement and self-redemption, an aim to overturn the eternal infamy attached to whores, making their identity as prostitutes their original sin. And only the sacrifice could earn them the the same personality as others.

This adaptation simplifies the complicated situation, and divide the students and the prostitutes into a binary division of purity versus impurity, categorizing and ranking women based on their sexual experiences.

The same trope appears with other prostitutes characters. In *Full Red River* (2023), Yaoqin, who is introduced as a former prostitute, is depicted as disheveled and flirtatious. Throughout the film, male characters often handle her in suggestive and degrading ways, turning her into a subject of objectification and lewd jokes. Under this atmosphere, even when the subsequent plot intentionally portrays Yaoqin as sharp, resolute, and strong-willed, the audience's bullets comments are often disrespectful and objectifying, focusing on her appearance with remarks like "This woman is really fair-skinned" and "She's so beautiful." <sup>2</sup>

### 2.2. Women lack the ability of self-protection

The second type of female characters in Zhang Yimou's films who often suffer sexual violence is women who are raped and lack self-protection ability. These female characters, although they have the will and courage to face their suffering, usually be presented as vulnerable in the rape shot. This part of the study will discuss the irrationality of the vulnerable image of the female characters and the rape plot from two aspects: the plot and the shot.

In cases of rape, certain women become particularly vulnerable victims due to several factors. First, there's often a notable physical strength difference between them and the male attackers. This disparity leaves them with fewer opportunities to defend themselves effectively. Unlike scenarios involving firearms or knives, here, brute force alone enables perpetrators to harm female characters.

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<sup>2</sup> The bullet comments reference from Youku video website. [https://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XNTk1OTkzNDA4NA==.html?spm=a2h0c.8166622.PhoneSokuProgram\\_1.dposter&s=bbef9ab5a52e466a82c9](https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNTk1OTkzNDA4NA==.html?spm=a2h0c.8166622.PhoneSokuProgram_1.dposter&s=bbef9ab5a52e466a82c9)



Additionally, lacking wealth or influence further exacerbates their vulnerability. These elements combined place them in a category often referred to as "vulnerable" victim groups.

### 2.3. Plots: substitutability and futility

Zhang Yimou's depictions of rape in his films exhibit substitutability or futility, which I will illustrate through *Article 20* and *Under the Light*. From a narratological standpoint, any plot element should serve the integrity of the narrative structure and the logic of character development. Yet, the rape scenes in Zhang's films fail to advance the plot and do little to enrich female characters beyond reinforcing their "vulnerability". The inclusion of rape scenes offers a "justifiable" pretext for depicting vulnerable female victimhood.

Firstly, the substitutability of such scenes in Zhang's works is discussed. Substitutability refers to the fact that although the rape plot contributes to the story or character development, the plot diminishes women and reinforces the stereotype of women as "vulnerable", and to ensure the fluent development of the story, this kind of rape plot can be replaced by other plots. Take *Article 20* (2024), Hao Xiuping, who is hearing impaired and struggles with poverty, is a typical female victim who is raped and lacks self-protection ability. In the film clip, the bully calls Liu Wenjing and asks to collect money by raping Hao Xiuping. Every time he raped Hao Xiuping, it was recorded that Hao Xiuping's family repaid 200 yuan. After being raped, Hao Xiuping falls into desperation, which motivates her husband to rush out and stab Liu Wenjing to death. The development of the event is taken into consideration in the ultimate judgement. The rape of Hao Xiuping, though seemingly pivotal for plot progression, is not only indispensable for developing her character but also a kind of stigmatization of Hao and such kind of female character. Through the meticulous depiction of background, character motivation, and inner psychology, equally compelling dramatic tension can be created without relying on sexual violence, and equally evoke audience sympathy and awareness of social issues. For example, the film *Green Book* (2018) effectively builds profound emotional resonance and raises awareness of social justice by depicting the protagonist's experiences with racial discrimination, such as not being allowed to use the bathroom by a white person, being refused a requested piano, being denied permission to try on a suit in a store and so on, and being physically threatened in a bar are just a few of the many incidents that are not emphatically filmed, rather than too many direct violent incidents.

Secondly, concerning the futility of such scenes. Futility refers that the emergence of a rape plot does not promote the plot, nor does it make the female characters more multifaceted, basically only shows the fragile image of women and stereotypical victim roles, and stigmatizes female characters. In the movie *Under the Light*, Yang Xiaowei is a female worker. She holds the key evidence of the villain's crime, which is eventually obtained by the police and used to accuse the villain. In the plot, Yang Xiaowei is allured by money but firmly rejects it. Then she is threatened with being raped and murdered while she is bound in a bra and still refusing to give up the evidence. The plot, narrative, and role functions of *Under the Light* belong to a classic pattern in the Propp theory, so we apply it to story-telling to analyze [14]. In the film, Yang Xiaowei plays a helper role, providing crucial evidence to aid the protagonist police officers, and a hero in her subplot against the antagonist. In the film, Yang Xiaowei refused to cooperate with the police investigation because of fear at the beginning and then took the initiative to contact the police and protect the evidence, such a change in heart and action has shaped her struggle and growth, and also her complex character. In this context, Yang Xiaowei's identity as a victim of sexual violence is unnecessary. Yet, in this particular plotline, she is reduced to being overly emphasized as a vulnerable victim, reinforcing a stereotypical portrayal of women.

## 2.4. Shots: Stigmatization and sexualization

Zhang's camera focuses on female victims, which leads to the audience's immersion into the perspective of criminals. These shots mainly show female characters' vulnerability, instead of their characteristics that can push the plots, which stigmatize and sexualize female characters.

The narrative technique Zhang uses is called "the perpetrator's perspective". In film theory, the narrative perspective refers to the angle from which the narrator or the characters in the play observe and tell the story. The choice of this perspective has a profound impact on the emotional investment and cognition of the audience. When a film shoots the victim from the perspective of the perpetrator, the audience may unconsciously understand the story from the perpetrator's point of view [15]. The perpetrator's perspective can activate the audience's empathy mechanism, even for negative characters. This perspective forces the audience into the perpetrator's thinking mode and may cause the audience to unconsciously have a certain degree of understanding or identification with the perpetrator's motives and behaviours. This psychological phenomenon is called "cognitive assimilation" in psychology, that is, the audience has assimilated the perpetrator's viewpoints and emotional states to some extent [16]. The audience will identify with the perpetrator. In addition, these series of shots along while satisfying certain groups' voyeurism and desire for conquest. Moreover, characters need to serve the plot, and camera shots are one of the main ways to express character images. Camera shots should also show the victim's image features that are beneficial to the plot progression. In this context, if the camera is focused on the female victims group, the audience will identify with the perpetrator, and while satisfying certain groups' voyeurism and desire for conquest. The shots emphasizing the victim's suffering and pain cannot make a significant contribution to moving the plot forward. However, in the 21st century, the camera shooting from the perpetrator's view is focused on the female victim's group. These shots emphasize the victim's suffering and pain cannot make a significant contribution to moving the plot forward.

In this section, three examples will be illustrated to show how Zhang Yimou's films stigmatize female characters via shooting rape scenes: *Coming Home*, *Article 20*, and *Under the Light*. Again, take *Article 20* as an example. In the film *Coming Home*, the upshot perspective of Lu Yanshi puts the audience into Feng Wanting's perspective to capture the horror and sense of oppression of the male abuser, and to capture Feng Wanting's expressions and actions such as pushing Lu Yanshi out of the door in the end to reflect the fierce resistance to the fear of the male abuser represented by Lu Yanshi. However, in the following plots, the male abuser was only mentioned by conversation, instead of shots. That indicates that the male abuser character may not be important, so the questionable camera design is pointless. In *Article 20*, Zhang Yimou filmed Hao's struggle with rape in a medium shot to show a powerless and hopeless image of Hao, then; captured Hao Xiuping's self-protective body movements and fearful facial expressions in a close-up shot to show her fear, and; showed relationship between Hao Xiuping's husband and the room Hao was in through a long shot, to indicate that all she could rely on was her husband, and lastly used close-ups and mid-shots of Hao Xiuping after the rape, shooting Hao Xiuping dressed in tattered clothes and exposing her scars of rape, which are used to reflect her vulnerability and despair. Although the series of scenes do give the audience a depressing feeling, it is suspected that the shots of Hao Xiuping dressed in tattered clothes and exposing her scars of rape, sexualized women through erotic symbols like messy hair and naked bodies satisfy male sexual proclivity. In addition, Hao Xiuping herself is a strong person, which can be seen from the follow-up plot in which she seeks help everywhere for the justice of the law, overcoming customer service deaf and mute congenital defects. However, the plot and the scene of the shot only present her single vulnerability, which is too one-sided. Similarly, in the film *Under the Light* (2023), Yang Xiaowei is a female worker who has a similar appearance to the wife of Zheng Gang, who is a powerful corrupt official. Yang Xiaowei holds the key evidence of Zheng Gang's

prime, which is eventually obtained by the police and used to punish Zheng Gang. In the plot, Li Zhitian is Zheng Gang's opponent to lure Yang Xiaowei with money, but Yang Xiaowei firmly guards the evidence. When shooting the plot that Yang Xiaowei guarding the evidence, Zhang takes a close-up shot of Yang's sweat-soaked hair, nervous urine, taped mouth and minimal underwear. The scene can only reflect Yang's fear and unbearable despite her firm and upright standpoint, and can not reflect the tense atmosphere of the exchange of information between the two sides in the plot. In addition, in the film *Coming Home*, the upshot perspective of Lu Yanshi puts the audience into Feng Wanting's perspective to capture the horror and sense of oppression of the male abuser, and to capture Feng Wanting's expressions and actions in the end to reflect the fierce resistance to the fear of the male abuser represented by Lu Yanshi.

Moreover, the commercialization of the Chinese film industry is one of the reasons why Zhang focuses the camera on the raped female character. In the 21st century, economic issues have become the main axis of the era in China. The progress of Chinese cinema is inseparable from its commercialization. Thus, the role of films went from ideological propaganda to comedy. The commercialized evaluation system made it necessary for the film to become a commodity. The most important thing for winning the market audience is to satisfy the audience's desires. Zhang Yimou deviated from his previous beliefs "In my work, sex is moderately represented and necessary for the plot", and the female bodies in his films became the symbol of desire in commercial blockbusters. The concept of female sexuality began to be exaggerated and showcased, and female bodies became a capital for creating entertainment hot topics. Based on this, in many of Zhang's films, especially later works, he focuses most of the camera shots on the vulnerable images of victims especially female victim groups when shooting rape scenes.

## 2.5. Women use their bodies as weapons

Apart from 'prostitutes' and 'mothers', there is another type of female characters in Zhang Yimou's films: they have a low status and want to change their status quo or their social class through their own abilities. However, the only way they eventually find and escape from the cage of society is to use their bodies as a bargaining chip or tool, selling their bodies to achieve a change in treatment or a leap in status. In this section, the two films *Ju Dou* (1990) and *Raise the Red Lanterns* (1991) will be used as the main sources of analysis to present this perspective in Zhang Yimou's films.

Due to the fact that there are biological differences, women and men have always been in a sexually unequal position. Symons mentions that sexuality, in all historical and cultural contexts, is seen as "something women have and are sought, something men do not have and desire". The social behaviors associated with sexuality often reveal the nature of the role: many men give women other resources in exchange for sex, while women do not use other resources to have sex with men [20]. So women's sexual value is exchange-valued. This notion of non-fair sex based on physiological differences gradually became an unspoken fact that evolved into a social stereotype. It is also presented repeatedly in Zhang's movie - i.e., "women's resistance is to use their sexual value to change their situation."

Zhang's movies discussed in this part show the point that women rebel by selling their bodies. This specific type of female character is often socially disadvantaged and incapable of deciding their destiny. They find a new turning point for themselves and hope to fight against injustice through their power. In what appears to be a process of 'self-redemption', they change their fate by choosing the person to whom they sell their bodies.

Women themselves are severely objectified in society, and the series of images presented by Zhang Yimou further aggravates this point: women still use themselves as 'objects', and they use their sexual value to gain benefits and seek a way out. This is not an awakening of women's consciousness and a revolt against women's unfair treatment, but rather a deepening of the idea of dwarfing and



objectifying women through the stereotypical portrayal of their roles and experiences: The first significance people give to female is their physical value, and they are often deemed to they don't have any other value that can bring about change for themselves.

In the middle of the film, Judou, this female protagonist initially lives in people's discourse. Before the character appears, the audience learns about her identity and status through the dialogue of other characters: a young beauty who is bought to be the 'tool of lust' for an elderly householder. Judou lives in this environment until she discovers that Yang Jinshan's nephew, Yang Tianqing, peeps at her through a small hole in the door. Her first reaction is to feel terrified, and alarmed, and to block the place used for peeping with straw. She began to understand at this point that Yang Tianqing desire her body, even though her first reaction at this point was to avoid it. But after making eye contact and being caught avoiding and peeping over and over again, her thoughts changed.

After Yang Tianqing heard the miserable screams from Ju Dou once again, he chose to make a move. He flung the chopper heavily on the counter, creating a sound reflecting his displeasure. After Judou sees the knife he left on the countertop, she chooses to cover for him. When Judou took a bath the next day, she removed the straw blocking the hole after thinking about it, which was tantamount to giving her tacit approval to the matter of Yang Tianqing's prying eyes. From the moment she walks in front of the bath tub, Judou's eyes are always drifting behind her, and she keeps paying attention to the sounds behind her. She had already decided at this point that she would show her body to Yang Tianqing in order to gain his sympathy and love so that she could carry out her next plan. When Yang Tianqing gets down in the hole where he is peeping, the viewpoint extends out from the hole, and the audience's sight is the same as Yang Tianqing's - Judou's back can be seen through here, thin and slender in the early morning light. The camera slowly switches back and forth between the voyeur's view and a close-up of Judou's front side, and when Judou turns her body around naked, the sunlight strikes her body, with the hand she had been covering her chest slowly drops, presenting her complete body to the voyeur. The camera focused on the upper half of her body. It could see her slowly opening her eyes, her eyes filled with sadness and despair as she looked at Yang Tianqing's direction. In every previous day's bath, she had never been in such slow motion: slowly undressing, turning around, and wrapping her arms around herself with crying. This was a premeditated and assured move to change her life. It prompts Judou to confirm of Yang Tianqing's love for her, and foreshadows that Judou have a sexual relationship with Tianqing later on.

When Yang Jinshan goes on a long trip, Judou takes the initiative to show her feelings for Yang Tianqing and has sex with him. From this point on, they maintain this 'immoral' relationship. Later, Judou and Yang Tianqing's child was born.

After Yang Jinshan fell into the dyeing pool and died, Yang Tianqing moved out of the mansion according to the family rules, and they could only have an affair in the cellar. The gossip brought about by the deformed relationship makes their son unable to endure or accept the existence of his real father, and he throws Yang Tianqing into the pool and drowns him when the air in the cellar is thin. Ju Dou is so desperate that she sets fire to the entire dye house to end it all.

In the film *Raise the Red Lanterns* the heroine Songlian, like Judou, is bought into the family and becomes the 'Fourth Mistress'.

The red lantern is the 'central object' throughout the film, and after Songlian enters the house, the significance of the lantern is revealed - the master will hang the lantern in the courtyard of whichever wife he spends the night with. On Songlian's first night in the house, her red lanterns on. She gradually learnt a lot of the rules: whichever Mistress's lantern was lit would get the service of foot massage, and whoever ordered food from the kitchen the next day would be allowed to do so. She began to understand that the red lanterns symbolised her status in this house - even though they were all wives, the more times the lanterns were lit, the more the so-called 'right of speech' and 'right to choose' they got in this place. So Songlian, from her initial discomfort to acceptance of the status quo, finally

want to change her status by trying to win favour. She pretends to be pregnant, because of this she lights up the courtyard with 'long-lasting lights'. However, it didn't last long, and after this incident was exposed, she lost her qualification to light the lanterns permanently. After a drunken night out, she inadvertently reveals the secret of Third Mistress' affair with Dr Gao, which cause Mei Shan's death. When she found that she had caused the death of Mei Shan with whom she had sympathised, she became completely insane.

The lantern is not only a symbol of the status of the women in the play but also highlights the fact that their value depends on whether they are 'favoured' or not, not on themselves. Even though the lighting of the lanterns gives them a higher status and a voice, it is still the head of the family, the man, who decides how the women are treated and chooses their destiny. The series of activities brought about by the lighting of the lamp: hammering the feet, choosing the dishes, etc., are a mechanism to encourage them to please the males, and whoever gains favour will enjoy better service than others.

Songlian's identity before coming to the House is mentioned repeatedly throughout the film - as a university student studying abroad. She gave up her studies because her father died and there was no way to continue paying for her education. Such a woman, who was already considered well-educated in those era, was confused and frightened when she came to such a situation. But she also quickly accepted the status quo - her abilities were not needed here, she was not needed to be educated and learn to play a musical instrument, she just need to be a wife.

Whether it's *Ju Dou* or *Raise the Red Lanterns*, it seems to bring the audience the illusion of 'women's resistance to the oppression in the feudal era'. Zhang Yimou tries to show the awakening of women's consciousness and their resistance to the hierarchical system through the women's behaviour of 'seeking benefits for themselves' and 'making changes in spite of the status quo' in his films. However, both films end with tragedy - the female protagonist's dedication for changing her social position and family treatment either ends in disgrace as she fails in her struggle.

In Zhang Yimou's works, he repeatedly used similar ways to show in his films that "women's greatest self-worth is their sexual value (their body)", which actually affects women's self-perception implicitly. When watching these scenes, spectators often feel uncomfortable and uneasy. The plot and shots in the movie are repeatedly presented through a patriarchal lens stripping female viewers away from their feminist cognition, thus these elements make it difficult for them to gain a true identity. As Gramsci mentioned in his concept which is called "war of position": What cultural hegemony gives us is not a static or static mode of domination, but a dynamic mode of domination, where everything is in progress, a dynamic balance between domination and resistance that is constantly changing [21].

By letting women use their bodies as weapons, the film structured again, within the patriarchal system in which female bodies are taken as sexual resources, thus subtly smoothes the rebellion. What this theory is trying to express is in line with the discussion of "using the same techniques to demonstrate the power of a single woman, deepening the sexual value of women only in public artworks". Women have always been the "sexual difference", both historically and contemporary, playing the role of both the male gaze and desire. Through the movie, women play the erotic object on the screen, the male actor's gaze on them combines with the audience's gaze through the screen and the camera simultaneously. In the end, it subconsciously influences the thoughts of those who watch the movie.

The homogenization of these contents makes a fact more deeply rooted in people's mind: women can only be dependent on men, and they can only seek their own value from men, so as to achieve a change in their family status and social hierarchy or to cross over. On the other hand, women are bought and sold because of the unfairness of their fate and the fact that they have no way to resist the patriarchal system; however, in the end, they still plan for themselves to take the edge off or turn a

tough situation around through men in the midst of the deep-rooted and internalized ideology of male superiority. There is no denying that in the time period in which the film is set, this is the majority, but it is possible to show women's resistance by using the 'minority' instead of using the same type of published screen work to sharpen the stereotypical image of women in the society, which just telling people that 'women can't get rid of the stereotypes by themselves after all and Women can't escape the misery of slavery by themselves'.

### 3. Conclusion

Upon analysing the three types, we find that the vulnerability of women in sexual violence is underscored by societal fixations on chastity, while male characters often advance the plot. The gratuitous portrayal of such violence, with a persistent focus on the victim through the camera lens, not only raises questions about the necessity of these scenes but also challenges the ethical implications of using sexual violence as a plot device.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform future filmmaking practices, promote a more critical engagement with filmic representations of sexual violence. The paper aspires to elevate the discourse on the role of cinema in shaping societal attitudes towards gender-based violence and to advocate for more responsible and nuanced portrayals in film. However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of our work, which is primarily theoretical in nature and does not account for the diverse responses from audiences. The actual impact of these cinematic representations on audience perceptions remains an open question. Furthermore, our typological approach may not fully capture the evolutionary arc of Zhang's filmmaking and could potentially disregard the broader influence of the growing feminist movement in China.

Future research should aim to bridge these gaps by incorporating empirical studies on audience reactions and by considering the dynamic interplay between cinema and societal progress in the context of gender equality.

By extending the scope of our inquiry to include these perspectives, we can foster a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between film, gender, and power, and work towards creating a cinematic landscape that is both reflective of and conducive to social change.

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