

Metaphorical Expressions in Female-Led Films: A Case Study of The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful

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Abstract. With the increasing number of films featuring female leads, it has become essential to explore the content that such films aim to convey. Therefore, this thesis focuses on analyzing the metaphorical expressions in female-led films, with the film *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* as the primary case study. This thesis conducts an analysis from multiple perspectives, including the production background of *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful*, its overall imagery style and themes, the use of color and elements, and the metaphorical techniques embedded in the characters' fates. It integrates the analysis of relevant shots, the application of props, and the scriptwriting in the film to achieve the goal of exploring the function of metaphorical expressions in female-led films. Through a series of research, we find that *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful*—whether in terms of character settings, background settings, or the artistic design of subtle shots—showcases the current situation and predicaments faced by women under patriarchal oppression in contemporary society. The film boldly breaks the traditional society's idealized expectations of female images and portrays multiple female characters who are deeply calculating and willing to do whatever it takes to achieve their goals. The film incorporates many elements of traditional Chinese culture, skillfully combining tradition with modernity, and transforming various traditional cultural elements into symbolic signs that shape characters' images and foreshadow the plot's development.

Keywords: Metaphor, female character, cinematic technology.

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the increasingly developing female-led theme films, and it is of great significance to the development of feminism and the analysis of film techniques [1]. The study mainly expands from the aspects of film shooting techniques, plot setting, scene setting art, and the use of metaphorical techniques. The literature analysis method is adopted to search and read relevant materials and literatures; the advantage of this method lies in its ability to well analyze the role of metaphors in female-led films in terms of the development of character fates and the presentation of social phenomena, which is conducive to the progress of the study. The final research objective of this study is to analyze the role of female characters in the film *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* and the role of film shooting techniques in the way of plot expression. To achieve this objective, the analysis of film shots and the review of relevant materials have been carried out.

2. Background

Directed by Taiwanese filmmaker Yang Ya-che, *The bold, the corrupt, and the beautiful* stands as a defining example of female-led cinema [2]. At its core are three generations of women from the Tang family, whose relentless pursuit of power and status in the world of wealth and influence takes center stage. To get what they want, they hold nothing back—lying, cheating, and even resorting to murder to climb the ladder. This is where the portrayal of non-typical female figures unfolds: it breaks away from the traditional and patriarchal stereotypes of women as "virtuous wives and good mothers." Instead, it turns women's hunger for power, their warped emotions, and the distorted parent-child relationships caused by social structural oppression into tangible symbols. All of this is examined thoroughly in the film's less-than-two-hour runtime, offering a rich example and model for female-led films. In the film, the director uses various elements—from the arrangement of props to camera design—to endow objects, spaces, and imagery with multiple layers of metaphor. Blending traditional Chinese culture and folk customs, he showcases the dynamics of Chinese families, as well as the often-overlooked potential and ambition in women.

The core of female-led films lies in "having female characters at the center of the narrative and embodying a female perspective in the creative process." *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* meets these criteria. Throughout the film, the story revolves around the three generations of the Tang family, focusing on their mental journeys, ways of doing things, and power dynamics. It also deconstructs or reconstructs traditional gender roles (such as "virtuous wives and good mothers" or "femme fatales"). What's more, the creators use delicate emotional expressions, unique narrative techniques, and camera language to replace the violence, conflicts, and other common narrative elements found in male-led films.

3. Analysis

3.1. Overall imagery, style, and theme

The film's extensive portrayal of female characters, along with its key imagery and style, is hinted at even in its title. First of all, "Guanyin" is a highly significant symbol in traditional Chinese culture. In legend, she is a hero who sacrifices herself to save all living beings—gentle yet powerful, embodying feminine traits while possessing a compassionate and broad-minded spirit. The word "blood," however, subverts this traditional image, endowing "Guanyin" with qualities like cruelty and greed, which are linked to bloodshed. As Jing Fei notes in *Imagery Narrative and Meaning Writing in The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful*, "Blood Guanyin" represents "a devil who appears kind on the surface but keeps hurting others for personal gain [3]." This overall imagery symbolizes the protagonist, Madam Tang, as a person who is two-faced and will stop at nothing to get what she wants. Though limited in length, the distinctive Chinese-style costumes, pipa (a traditional Chinese plucked string instrument), blue-purple color palette, and the background with a slightly horrific tone have jointly rendered the atmosphere of the entire story, playing a crucial role in facilitating the development of the subsequent plot. The director holds the view that the employment of such a *nian'ge* (a traditional Chinese storytelling art form) technique enables audiences, whether they have been exposed to *shuoshu* (traditional Chinese storytelling performance) or not, to feel the familiar atmosphere of story-telling, thereby making it easier for them to accept the plot. Li Mengyang, in his work *The Construction of a Meaningful World through Folk Custom Integration: On the New Trend of Folk-customized Creation in Taiwan Regional Films in Recent Years*, notes that this film "effectively encloses the story content of 'good being rewarded

and evil being punished' within the framework of this 'prologue-epilogue' narrative mode, enabling the film's narrative form and content to form a mutually responsive synergetic relationship [4]." In addition, there are religious elements embedded in *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* [4]. As mentioned earlier, religious elements are already implied in the film's title. At the beginning of the film, two nian'ge (a traditional Chinese storytelling art form) artists are placed in the scene of the "Underworld Judgment" — a concept in traditional Chinese religion that refers to the trial of the deceased by the God of the Underworld. Qiu Daidong mentioned in his work *Feasible approaches to integrating traditional rap art into film creation from the perspective of narrative function: An analysis with The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful as an example*. Masterpieces Review, The art of Nian Chang not only contributes to the construction of a film's suspenseful features and the interpretation of its themes, but also enables communication with the audience and shapes the film's unique style [5]. The performer sits upright between the statues of Yama (the God of the Underworld in East Asian religious traditions) and narrates the background of the story in a gentle, unhurried manner. The trial in the Underworld (the realm of the dead in traditional Chinese beliefs), the story unfolding amid the transition between life and death, and the grotesque set designs and lighting are sufficient to demonstrate the significance of "religion" in this film. As the plot progresses later, the Guanyin statue with a broken arm, various types of food used as ritual offerings, and the bana flower (a flower associated with the boundary between life and death in East Asian folklore) elements featured in clothing accessories and house decorative paintings all contain hidden implications. On the surface, the Tang family appears as a respectable and dignified household. The Buddhism that Madam Tang believes in serves as a gentle and compassionate facade, concealing the pure evil deep within her heart.

3.2. Character portrayal and element application

In the film *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful*, there are various elements such as costumes and props, which serve as important catalysts for guiding the smooth development of the plot [6]. Beyond driving the plot forward, the film also contains many striking metaphors. First and foremost, the director has designed highly elaborate costumes for the female characters in the film. As Tian Junxi notes in his work *A Study on the Role of Costumes in Film Character Portrayal*, in the field of film and television, costumes not only serve to illustrate the social background of the story but also maintain an inseparable connection with interpreting the plot, shaping characters, and advancing the story progression [1]. Costume design in films is not merely intended to showcase the characters' appearance; it is more importantly aimed at conveying the characters' personalities, backgrounds, and emotional states. Differences in characters' costumes symbolize distinct social classes, personalities, and even fates.

First, let's analyze the costumes of the three main characters. At the beginning of the film, when the Tang family holds an art exhibition for Mrs. Wang, the three characters wear dresses in a unified color tone. Though the styles of the dresses vary, the three stand together to form a harmonious scene that is very pleasing to the eye. The three members of the Tang family have custom-made matching outfits specifically for the art exhibition, in a deep blue color — a detail that indicates their deliberate effort to create an image of a respectable and harmonious family in daily life. Madam Tang and Tangzhen wear a cheongsam and a sleeveless dress respectively, both made of highly similar satin fabric; Tangning, however, chooses a velvet fabric in a darker shade. Through these subtle differences in color and fabric, the director hints at the discrepancies in character traits between Tangning and the other two she stops, a medium shot captures the Lin family sitting across from her. At this moment, the camera focuses on Mr. and Mrs. Lin, while blurring the foreground. A

close observation reveals that a bouquet of white flowers is placed in front of Mr. and Mrs. Lin; the cameraman adjusts the shooting angle to deliberately make the white flowers appear directly between the couple from the audience's perspective. In traditional Chinese funeral culture, white flowers are regarded as offerings to the deceased and carry an inauspicious connotation. Such an ingenious use of props for hinting also appears in the middle part of the film. After the Lin family is wiped out, Madam Tang goes out with the township head's wife. In a tailor's shop, the director focuses on depicting the township head's wife — first her reflection in a mirror, then her image as she steps out of the mirror through an inverted camera shot. Her lines here are: "I don't know who to return the jade necklace I borrowed from Mrs. Lin to," "Let's go help the Lin family look for a burial site together," and "Mrs. Lin called me the day before the incident happened." When delivering the first two lines, the director shoots the township head's wife as a reflection in the mirror; only when she says the last line does the camera switch back to filming her in person. Here, the mirror symbolizes lies: deep down, the township head's wife feels no compassion or sorrow for the Lin family's tragedy. And as revealed in the subsequent plot, she does not actually help the Lin family choose a burial site — contrary to the polite remarks she made to Madam Tang. It is only after she steps out of the mirror that she reveals the truth, telling Madam Tang about the phone call she received from Mrs. Lin just before Mrs. Lin's death. This unique filming technique clearly and accessibly embodies the township head's wife's hypocritical personality. Overall, the element application and symbiotic technique have the momentous benefits for the movie, just as Li Pengfei said in his *A Discussion on the Role of Subtext in Character Portrayal in Film and Television Works: Taking the Taiwanese Film The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful as an Example* [7]: "The symbolic technique has become a conscious external form used by creators to express their perceptions and ideas about the world and society."

4. Metaphor and expression of characters' fate

In the film *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful*, each female member of the Tang family meets her own end [8]. Throughout the story, the director focuses on depicting how Madam Tang, with meticulous planning, obtains everything she desires—even if this path forces her to kill her own biological daughter Tangning and groom her granddaughter Tangzhen into the next generation of cold-blooded power inheritors. In a state of being obsessed with power, the three female characters of the Tang family each symbolize a different form of ruthless power holders. First and foremost, Madam Tang stands as the most successful model on this thorny path of pursuing fame and fortune. She is also a bearer of deep trauma. The film implies that she worked as a hostess in her younger years; through this experience, she came to understand deeply that weakness and kinship are the most forbidden weaknesses, and that boundless power is the only armor to protect herself. Thus, in her middle age, she chose to immerse herself in this game of power, maneuvering with meticulous planning to lure the most prominent figures in society into the elaborate web of lies she had woven—only to devour them afterward. She succeeded, but what was the cost this time? To eliminate obstacles and destroy evidence, she killed her own daughter with her own hands. To consolidate her glory, she did not hesitate to impose her own trauma onto the people closest to her. Tangning is like a pawn, constantly exploited by her mother as she grows up. Treated as an object, she relies on sexual relationships to fulfill the tasks assigned by her mother. Trapped in such a life for a long time, Tangning can only numb herself with alcohol and drug abuse; occasionally, she also reveals her longing for love to her mother. However, Madam Tang turns a blind eye to all this, resolutely forging ahead in her pursuit of power. As the most innocent member of the Tang family, Tangning tries to escape her mother's control by running away. She chooses to run away because she realizes

she no longer has any utilitarian value, and naively hopes that her mother will at least spare her life. But reality proves she has lost this bet. Madam Tang has long become a devil without morality or humanity, her emotions completely replaced by the logic of power. Within this family, Tangzhen inherits the combined traits of both Madam Tang and Tangning. Growing up in such a distorted family environment, Tangzhen learned to serve tea and water and read people's expressions from an early age, while witnessing countless family scandals: sexual bribery, murder, and fraud. She longs for love and harbors aspirations toward her good friend Lin Pianpian and Marco, but love is always accompanied by control and betrayal—thus, her dreams are shattered. When her good friend Lin Pianpian lay dying and begged for help, Tangzhen remained indifferent—she just watched quietly as Lin struggled to her death. And Madam Tang, outside the hospital room window, witnessed every moment of this. From this point on, Madam Tang's cold-blooded selfishness and calmness were passed on to Tangzhen, and she felt extremely relieved to see Tangzhen "grow" in this way. This plot once again confirms that Madam Tang ultimately trades the flesh, blood, and emotions of herself and others for power. Tangzhen retains a trace of Tangning's innocence; as a child of the Tang family, both of them crave love endlessly, yet their desires all end in vain. Tangzhen sets her beloved Marco free, and at the train station, she offers her love to Marco with full expectation—only to be met with rejection and rape. Marco's rejection shatters the last trace of Tangzhen's beautiful illusions about love and her remaining innocence, completely crushing her former worldview. When she reaches adulthood, she finally enacts revenge for the trauma inflicted on her by Madam Tang. She is no longer bound by family ties and makes a decision even more extreme than Madam Tang's — instead of letting Madam Tang die, she keeps her barely alive, trapped in perpetual agony. Having comprehended the true essence of power, Tangzhen fully matures into an even colder "future" that surpasses Madam Tang herself. Essentially, this film depicts the ways in which women attain power under a patriarchal society, as well as the extreme oppression imposed on women. In the film, Madam Tang uses seemingly extreme methods to gain power—this is an exaggerated expressive technique. For in a society dominated by patriarchal rules, it is almost impossible for women to acquire such power. The film portrays three distinct female characters. As Jingmin mentioned in his work *Polyphonic Narrative, Reconstruction of Motherhood, Body Politics - The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful from the Perspective of Feminism*. New Cinematic Works [9]: The film also creates an ambiguous yet bold space for women. Through the film text, we can see that the director explores a world free from the limitations of a single gender and the ethical norms under the patriarchal structure that "mothers must be kind and fathers must be strict", In such an ambiguous world, women can maintain an active existence and gradually construct their self-identification as multi-faceted subjects."They break away from the expectations society holds for women—such as being virtuous wives and devoted mothers, or embodying noble virtues. None of the three Tang women can be called "kind"; they commit murder, tell lies, employ underhanded tactics, and crave what they desire with utter disregard for the consequences. Yet such survival holds no happiness at all; it is merely a zombie-like form of strength, with eternal emptiness and suffering at its core. This is precisely the implication of the film's title, *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful*—it appears compassionate (like the Guanyin), but beneath the surface lies nothing but blood and slaughter. The so-called "growth" of the characters is precisely the process of carving themselves into this "Blood Guanyin," and the price paid is everything that makes them human. Cao Yan noted that this film "boldly engages in artistic innovation, breaks down the traditional concept of mother-daughter relationships, and handles character dynamics in a more dramatic way" [10]. Furthermore, it integrates Taiwan's unique historical context, cultural status quo, and colonial mentality more extensively into the narrative. Through its portrayal of Taiwan's local culture, Taiwan's social and

historical events, Japanese elements, and other aspects, it constructs a Taiwanese female imagery world imbued with a strong regional identity"—and this is precisely what makes *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* so valuable.

5. Conclusion

The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful is an outstanding film and television work. It is not an epic of growth about redemption and light, but a picture of growing amid mire and struggling in darkness. With art and aesthetics, it dissects the process of the alienation and distortion of female power. Under the cannibalistic rules of this system, the Tang women have no choice but to offer their emotions and conscience as sacrifices, striving to gain the right to survive. The "Blood Guanyin" is their symbol and a metaphor for their fate. Beneath the Guanyin-like delicate appearance lies greedy and corrupt ambition; while the exterior seems compassionate and resplendent, the interior is empty and void. Stripped away by the cruel power system, all that remains is the blood-stained pursuit of money and power, and a self-righteous form of "love." The constant inheritance and endless evil give rise to a new generation of cold-blooded "Guanyin," who sits enshrined on a lotus pedestal carved from the flesh and blood of loved ones. At the end of the film, subtitles appear: "The most terrifying thing is not the punishment before your eyes, but a future without love." Some love brings nothing but endless pain; some victories only lead to eternal perdition. In the world of *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful*, those without love are the majority. After sacrificing everything, what they gain is still not happiness—only power lingers in the endless hell, passed down through generations with a smile.

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