



**An Analysis of Shaping of Female Characters in Films Directed by
Mainland Chinese, Taiwanese and Chinese Diasporic Female
Directors**

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Abstract

This thesis intends to examine the shaping of female characters in films directed by Chinese female directors. Six films are selected as examples: *The Crossing* (*Guo chun tian*, Bai Xue, 2019), *Angels Wear White* (*Jia nian hua*, Vivian Qu, 2017), *Love Education* (*Xiang ai xiang qin*, Sylvia Chang, 2017), *Dear Ex* (*Shei Xian Ai Shang Ta De*, Mag Hsu and Chih-Yen Hsu, 2018), *Song of the Exile* (*Ke tu qiu hen*, Ann Hui, 1990), and *The Farewell* (Lulu Wang, 2019). The selected films are divided into three groups: those directed by mainland Chinese, Taiwanese and Chinese diasporic women. By comparing the female characters with their counterparts and by analyzing the character shaping and identity formation of the female protagonists in these films, this thesis will discuss the commonalities and differences among the protagonists. The project is not intended to make general and mechanical conclusions, but to show how a variety of female characters have appeared in recent Chinese films directed by female directors, and how these characters epitomize different groups of women or female identities in the current Chinese society.

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Introduction

Greater China has gone through tremendous transitions from a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society to being divided into the Communist People's Republic of China, the Republic of China (Taiwan), and Hong Kong and Macau, which were colonized for more than a century and a half and were returned to the People's Republic of China with their innovative statuses of Special Administrative Regions in 1997 and 1999. Each country or region has gone through different social movements, and different ways towards de-colonization and modernization occurred. Moreover, Chinese have provided a great number of people to the global immigrant community, who have formed the Chinese Diaspora, which has further complicated the understandings of Chinese ethnic identity.

Also, the last years have been an important period for feminist thought to develop in the above-mentioned regions due to the influence of Western feminist theory and the development of global market economy. Recent Chinese Female directors are given opportunities to develop new styles of directing. They shape their characters differently from past Chinese female directors, western female directors, and male directors, forming specific characteristics of their own kind. While on the other hand, female directors from different regions also have differences in shaping female characters in their films, considering their different life experiences. The female characters in films made by female directors are thus worth comparison since they are the epitome of different female groups and the embodiment of different identities.

This project is intended to examine the identity formation and character shaping of

female characters in films directed by female directors who are ethnically Chinese. Six films are selected for the examination: *The Crossing* (Guo chun tian, Bai Xue, 2019), *Angels Wear White* (Jia nian hua, Vivian Qu, 2017), *Love Education* (Xiang ai xiang qin, Sylvia Chang, 2017), *Dear Ex* (Shei Xian Ai Shang Ta De, Mag Hsu and Chih-Yen Hsu, 2018), *Song of the Exile* (Ke tu qiu hen, Ann Hui, 1990), and *The Farewell* (Lulu Wang, 2019). Among the six films chosen, two of them are directed by mainland Chinese female directors, two of them are directed by Taiwanese female directors, and the rest of them, separately directed by Ann Hui and Lulu Wang, are directed by female directors with cross-cultural backgrounds: Ann Hui, with a Chinese father and a Japanese mother, was raised in Hong Kong and studied in the United Kingdom for film; Lulu Wang is a Chinese American.

A variety of female characters are covered in the six films listed above. The commonalities and differences among the protagonists in these films will be discussed in the thesis. The project is not intended to make general and mechanical conclusions, but to show how a variety of female characters have appeared in recent Chinese films directed by female directors, and how these characters epitomize different groups of women or female identities in the current Chinese society.

Several English treatises have made crucial contribution to the methodology of this thesis. In *Alice Doesn't*, De Lauretis explains how female characters (woman), fictional constructs in literary works, and women, the real historical beings in reality, are different but mutually influence each other (5-6). This thesis is premised on her discussion on woman and women. *Gender, Discourse and the Self in Literature*, edited by Kwok-kan Tam and Terry Siu-Han Yip, offers a collection of discussions on gendered identity formation in Chinese

literary works with a Chinese perspective. This thesis tries to adopt a similar kind of perspective for the selected films.

Chapter 1: *The Crossing* and *Angels Wear White*: The Shark, The Statue of Marilyn Monroe and Teenage Girls

The Crossing and *Angels Wear White*, separately directed by Bai Xue in 2018 and Vivian Qu in 2017, are two female-directed films featuring teenage girls as protagonists. Both films are directed by mainland Chinese female directors with fairly low budgets and accordingly low box office outcomes. Unlike most commercial films with teenage protagonists, these directors do not emphasize romantic relationships in their films. Quite on the contrary, the teenage girl protagonists in the two films are involved in crimes.

Angels Wear White: Vivian Qu and Her Use of Statue of Marilyn Monroe

It is useful that we have basic knowledge about the reason why Vivian Qu, the director and screenwriter of *Angels Wear White*, initiated making this film. According to Li, in a question and answer session after a preview of the film in a movie theater in Beijing, Vivian



Picture 1 Visitors taking photos of *Forever Marilyn* (Picture by DoodleMatt via Flickr)

Qu gave an answer regarding how the making of *Angels Wear White* began. She mentioned two incidents related to two statues of Marilyn Monroe, that separately happened in Chicago and Guigang, Guangxi Province,

China. According to a report in *The Guardian*, in 2011, a giant statue titled *Forever Marilyn*, designed by Seward Johnson and modeled after the most famous leg-flashing scene in *The Seven Year Itch* (Billy Wilder, 1955), was built in Chicago (See Picture 1). After the statue was built, it was criticized by critics for being “sexist and creepy” and vandalized by tourists (Brooks). The statue was removed in less than a year. An even taller counterfeit version of the

statue was built three years later in Guigang, a small city in Guangxi Province in China (See Picture 2). So surprisingly similar are the fates of the two statues that the second statue was



removed in less than six months, too. The reason why

Picture 2 The counterfeit version of *Forever Marilyn* in Guigang was removed and discarded in a landfill (Tencent News, Photographer Unknown)

it was removed is still unknown. Vivian Qu referred to the two incidents as “public art incidents” and wondered why in such a small city like Guigang, a city completely different from Chicago, people would want to build such a statue. She also wondered why both statues were soon removed after being built and what Chinese people thought of this foreign, sexy woman who was perhaps unknown to them (qtd. in Y. Li, 17).

Angels Wear White tells a story of two teenage girls, Xiaowen and Xiaomi. Xiaowen is a twelve-year-old girl who is in the sixth grade in elementary school. One night when Xiaowen hangs out with her classmate Xinxin, they are brought to a hostel by Xinxin’s godfather and

are sexually assaulted, which is witnessed by a hostel attendant, Xiaomi. Xiaomi uses her cell phone to record the crime scene in the surveillance video, but she is afraid that giving the proof to the lawyer and the police would cause her to lose her job, because she is underage, does not have an identity card, and can only work illegally in the hostel.

The film has two storylines. One storyline is from Xiaowen's perspective, regarding how the misfortune of being sexually assaulted influences the way her parents treat her, and how she suffers during the investigation of the crime. The other storyline is from Xiaomi's perspective, telling the story of how witnessing the crime scene changes Xiaomi's life as well. Although Xiaowen and Xiaomi are the two main protagonists in the film, there are rarely scenes in which they appear together, except for the beginning of the film when Xiaowen, Xinxin and Xinxin's godfather check in the hostel. The only person connecting the two storylines is Hao Jie, a lawyer who is willing to help Xiaowen and goes to Xiaomi for further information.

There are many gendered codes in *Angels Wear White*. In the film, there is also a statue of Marilyn Monroe, which appears several times in the film that carries deeper meanings and is obviously modeled after the counterfeit *Forever Marilyn*. I take this statue as semiotically representing women, which would be clear if we examine the several appearances of the statue in the film closely.

The film opens with a scene showing Xiaomi admiring the statue, carefully touching Marilyn Monroe's red nail-polished toenails. Then she looks up, standing under the dress of the statue, seeing from a typical voyeuristic perspective that the statue is wearing a white underwear. It shows that Xiaomi, a fifteen-year-old teenage girl, is so curious herself about

what it means to be a female that she stares at the female genitals of the statue, an explicitly female-gendered symbol. The way Xiaomi deals with witnessing the crime scene when she chooses to hide the proof and refuse to report to the police proves that she has not yet had empathy for Xiaowen. She has not developed clear awareness that she and Xiaowen, the victim, share the same identity as female.

After Xiaowen's mother finds out that Xiaowen was sexually assaulted, she blames her daughter for being too feminine at an early age. To vent her frustration and anger, she rips Xiaowen's dresses and cuts Xiaowen's long hair, making her look like a boy. These inconsiderate actions cause Xiaowen to run away from home at night. She spends the night under the hemline of the raised skirt of the statue. This time the statue appears as a guardian of Xiaowen, substituting for her biological mother.

Xiaomi has a colleague, Lili, who is like Xiaomi's older sister. Throughout the first half of the film, she keeps giving cosmetics and accessories to Xiaomi as gifts when Xiaomi covers her shift. Xiaomi accompanies Lili to an illegal clinic to have a surgical abortion, where the nurse promises the surgery to be completely painless and minimally invasive. Apparently, the nurses' words are not true. After the surgery, Xiaomi, for the second time, witnesses a tragedy that happened to women. She sees how much pain Lili has to put up with when Lili curses that she would never be a woman in her next life. Lili, in the end, decides to resign. In the meantime, the owner of the hostel finds out that Xiaomi has given hints to Hao Jie and decides to fire her. Xiaomi again comes to the beach where the statue stands, only to discover that it has been vandalized. There are fliers posted on the heels of the statue. Xiaomi tries to tear the fliers down, but only in vain. They may represent all kinds of physical and

psychological hurt women suffer from, and the action of trying to tear down the fliers shows that Xiaomi has begun to have empathy for female as a group, instead of having pure curiosity in the beginning. This is also an important transitional point in the film.

To acquire an identity card of her own so that she could work legally in this city, Xiaomi chooses to use the video she has to blackmail the criminal, Xinxin's godfather, for money. However, she fails and is severely beaten. She reaches Hao Jie for help. After Hao Jie pays up her hospitalization costs, she finally decides to help Xiaowen and gives the police her video recording. With her recording as a new proof, the police decide to reinvestigate the case. Xiaowen, in a white dress, is taken to a hospital for gynecological examination. Spectators could only see Xiaowen's legs open towards a male gynecologist conducting an intrusive



Picture 3 Male Gynecologist Conducting Intrusive Inspection on Xiaowen

inspection. And because Xiaowen's face does not show up on screen, it appears as if the legs belong to a spectator (See

Picture 3). On the other side, Xiaomi, losing both her job and her chance of having a new identity card, goes to Lili's ex-boyfriend who persuades her to become a prostitute. She, too, wears a white dress, sitting in front of a dresser putting on accessories left to her by Lili. As she waits for her client to arrive, she hears the news from the radio saying that Xiaowen's

godfather has been arrested and prosecuted. The news that follows is about a seminar held by Women’s Federation of Linhai City whose theme is “Teenagers are the future of our country”. Hearing this, Xiaomi runs off on her motorcycle. When she rides on her motorcycle on the highway, the statue of Marilyn Monroe that has been broken down is being carried on a truck. The white dress of the statue flies in the wind like a flag, leading Xiaomi to ride forward unhesitatingly, with her white dress blown in the wind as well (See Picture 4).



Picture 4 Xiaomi follows the removed statue of Marilyn Monroe

With the statue appearing repeatedly in the film, implying the development of the story and representing the collective fate of women in the current

society, *Angels Wear White* is clearly equipped with a female perspective and feminist viewpoints. The different roles the statue of Marilyn Monroe plays, either in the film or in reality in Chicago and Guigang, represent women’s situation in the current society. To tourists peering under the dress of the statue, women are objects to be gazed at and the source of voyeuristic desire. When the statue is vandalized with fliers and paint, women are victims harmed physically like Xiaowen, Xiaomi, and Lili, who all suffer from physical harm to some extent in the film. When the statue is criticized to be as sultry, titillating, and even morally corrupt to appear in public, women are targets of slut-shaming and other kinds of unfair judgements based on stereotypes.

The multiple and complicated roles women play in the current society, represented and symbolized by the statue, are also shown by the distinctive female roles in the film: the underaged illegal worker Xiaomi who gradually gains awareness of being female from witnessing and experiencing sufferings; the rebellious Xiaowen who is deeply hurt by the sex assault, her mother's reactions and the process of the investigation, but who also plays a unsatisfactory role for spectators who expect a perfect victim; Xiaowen's mother, who cares about her daughter but does not give Xiaowen the attention and patience she deserves; the warm-hearted Hao Jie; and Lili, who loves dressing up and genuinely treats Xiaomi as a sister. The fates and stories of the female characters intricately connect with each other. Sharing the same gender, they also show different facets and various possibilities, refusing a generalized definition for being female.

In the ending sequence of the film, Xiaomi rides on her motorcycle and follows the statue that has been broken apart. What the sequence seems to show is the spiritual power of female consciousness, represented by the statue of Marilyn Monroe. On the other hand, the differences between the various female characters further complicate the discussion of femininity and femaleness in the film. In addition, the symbol that represents female consciousness, the statue of Marilyn Monroe, is in fact a cultural construct rather than a natural being. The complication of implicit meanings adds ambivalence and ambiguity to the feminist ideas that the director tries to convey.

The Crossing: Searching for Identity by Crossing Borders

Bai Xue, the director of *The Crossing*, has a similar story regarding the origin of film and how her inspiration is used as a symbol in the film. In an interview, Bai Xue said that she

once saw a shark stuck in a bay near a dock. “It was striking that something colossal could also be so pitiful.” The symbol of a shark which repetitively appears like the statue of Marilyn Monroe in *Angels Wear White* is thus included in *The Crossing*.

The Crossing tells the story of three teenage characters: Peipei, Peipei’s friend Jo, and Jo’s boyfriend Hao. Peipei, as the daughter of a father with Hong Kong citizenship and a mother who is a mainlander, is a Hong Kong citizen herself and goes to high school in Hong Kong. However, she lives with her mother in Shenzhen because her parents have divorced, meaning that she has to cross the border between Hong Kong and mainland China twice a day to go to school and get back home. To fulfill the wish of travelling together to Japan with Jo, Peipei starts to smuggle electronic gadgets with Hao for money, making use of her appearance as a student when she goes through customs.

The protagonist Peipei is characterized as representative of two special groups of people: “dan fei” and “shen gang shui ke”. The term of “dan fei” stands for children who only have one parent with Hong Kong citizenship, while the other (usually the mother and a mainlander) is not a Hong Kong citizen, as is the case for Peipei. “Shen gang shui ke” denotes people who travel between Hong Kong and mainland China to smuggle illegal items.

The identity of Peipei is thus rather complicated. As a teenager who lives with her mother in Shenzhen, she lives her daily life as a mainland Chinese. As a student in Hong Kong, she also sees how dazzling and luxurious life could be when she hangs out with her friend Jo, who skips classes for parties and whose aunt lives in a mansion with a swimming pool. As a smuggler, or a “shen gang shui ke,” she becomes a criminal who does not quit even after she has earned enough money, for she enjoys the thrill and excitement she

experiences when she successfully gets across the border again. Moreover, she has developed family-like feelings for the gang members, and she has a crush on Hao, her accomplice in the smuggling crime.

The multifold identity of Peipei is expressed through the action implied by the film's title: *The Crossing*. For Peipei, the everyday action of crossing the border not only represents the process of transition from a mainlander to a Hong Konger or otherwise but is also the exact way for her to accomplish her smuggling task. It is only through the crossing that the complication of Peipei's identity is shown. Correspondingly, the Chinese title of *The Crossing*, *Guo chun tian*, could be interpreted in two ways as well. Literally in Chinese, "guo" is the action of getting passed or crossing while "chun tian" is the season of spring. "Chun" or spring is also commonly used in Chinese to represent youth. Therefore, "guo chun tian" could be understood as experiencing and spending one's time as a youth. On the other hand, it is also a term that smugglers use when they successfully get through customs with their smuggled items.

What accompanies the multifold layers of the identity of Peipei is actually the loss of identity. For one thing, there is inherent inconsistency within the vocabulary of "dan fei" since "dan fei" could be directly and literally translated into English as "one (of the two) is not". Inconsistencies and differences are commonly felt by "dan fei", offspring of parents who themselves have different identities and citizenships. As mentioned earlier, Peipei experiences both lifestyles. But Peipei's case is even more extreme, since her parents have long divorced and live in different cities between which there is a border.

In the film, Peipei's father has started a new family, for whom he saves up for housing

mortgage. When Peipei accidentally sees her father in a restaurant with his new family, Peipei just stares at him outside the window instead of letting him know that she is around. The situation is no better with Peipei's mother, although they live together. In most sequences when Peipei's mother is present, she is playing mahjong with her friends, while Peipei staying in her own bedroom, unwilling to talk to her mother or her mother's friends even when her mother asks her to say hello. The mother and the daughter are always separated by the walls in the apartment, representing their faraway psychological distance.

Peipei is lonely and strives to search for her identity, not only within her family, but also within the specific social and geographical context. The everyday crossing of Peipei between Shenzhen and Hong Kong, which is initially the reason for her sense of loneliness and her loss of identity, in turn becomes her source of identity when she seeks love, friendship and family-like relationships in the smuggling gang. By successfully smuggling iPhones across the border, Peipei proves her abilities and is praised by Sister Hua, the head of the gang. Likewise, Peipei develops affection for Sister Hua. For Peipei, the smuggling gang is like a substitute family, a place where her personal value is recognized. Sister Hua shares with Peipei's mother the same hobby of playing mahjong. There is one sequence in the film when Sister Hua is playing mahjong with some of the other gang members while Peipei just sits closely beside her and helps her choose her mahjong tiles. When Sister Hua wins the game, she calls Peipei her "lucky charm" and announces that Peipei is her goddaughter from now on. If we compare this sequence with the earlier sequence when Peipei's mother is playing mahjong with her friends while Peipei refuses to talk to her and her friends, this creates a parallel between the "godmother" of Peipei, Sister Hua, and Peipei's biological mother.

The mahjong scene, used to compare and contrast the relationship between Peipei and her mother and Peipei and Sister Hua, is intriguingly followed by a plot indicating that the current harmony between Peipei and Sister Hua is only an illusion. After receiving a phone call, Sister Hua says that there is another batch to deliver, and that she wants Peipei to be the carrier. She starts with persuading Peipei by calling her “dear daughter” and continues to say that the delivery is worth several thousand, as “a gift from your godmother.” Peipei agrees in the beginning, before she finds out that the “batch” to be delivered is a gun. Although Hao cuts in in time to rescue Peipei out of the delivery, it is clear enough for a spectator to see from Sister Hua’s sinister facial expressions that it is a test from her for Hao and Peipei to see whether they could be trusted to work for her. Sister Hua is not as kind and loving as Peipei and the film’s viewers have imagined.

If this sequence only shows a sign of distrust between Peipei and Sister Hua, what triggers Peipei to completely betray Sister Hua and her gang is her agreeing to work with Hao behind Sister Hua’s back. After completing several tasks together and getting to know each other more, Hao and Peipei develop romantic feelings for each other. The feelings are handled in an extremely subtle and restrained way by the director, without even one scene of physical contact between the two characters. When Hao starts his own “business” of smuggling and secretly competes with Sister Hua’s team, Peipei agrees to deliver for him. However, when they reach the place of pickup, Sister Hua has already been there, waiting for them to arrive. When Sister Hua slaps Peipei on the face, and when a man who works for Sister Hua opens Peipei’s clothes to remove the iPhones strapped around her waist and laps, Hao is unable to protect her, showing that neither Sister Hua nor Hao is the right person to

provide appropriate affection and recognition to Peipei. At this moment the police rush in, and Peipei's adventure of smuggling comes to an end.

In the whole film, to migrate is a shared goal for several characters. Firstly, Peipei's wish of travelling to Japan with her friend Jo, is the reason why she starts smuggling for money. When Jo finds out Peipei's secret relationship with her boyfriend Hao, she is mad at Peipei and rips up the flight tickets. Secondly, Jo prepares to study abroad with her parents, only to find out that her parents want her younger brother to go with them instead of bringing Jo together. Thirdly, Peipei's mother always has a dream of earning enough money for immigrating to Spain, but the money she has collected is taken away by her boyfriend. Thus far, all dreams of migration are broken.

In the ending sequence of the film, Peipei and her mother climb to the hilltop she and Hao went up before. Her mother says, "That's Hong Kong for you." Then, flakes of snow fall from the sky, something Peipei and Jo originally wanted so much to see that they chose Japan as their travel destination, for snow is very rare in southern cities like Shenzhen and Hong Kong. If migration means going elsewhere, the director's hint in this last scene could be understood as: There is still a possibility of reconciliation within the current situation, which does not have to be sought in a faraway place.

Like the statue of Marilyn Monroe in *Angels Wear White*, a semiotic symbol of a shark repetitively appears in *The Crossing*. A shark is being kept in the giant fish tank in the mansion owned by Jo's aunt due to superstitious considerations (See Picture 5), and the icon of a shark also appears as Hao's tattoo and on a phone case that Peipei gives Hao as a gift.

Near the end of the film, Peipei releases the shark kept in the tank in the mansion back into the sea. That coincides with one sequence in the beginning when Peipei goes to a yacht party with Jo. In that sequence, Peipei joyfully falls into the water from a water slide, even though she does not know how to swim. There is reason to believe that both Peipei and Hao see themselves in a similar situation to the shark's in the fish tank, living a restricted and unfree life, longing for change of situation. To release the shark to the sea represents



Picture 5 The Shark kept in the water tank in Jo's aunt's mansion

the way that Peipei reconciles with her-self that is symbolized by the shark.

How Teenage Dreams Come True in Mainland China: “Qingchun Films” and Censorship

The use of repetitive symbols is not the only commonality between *The Crossing* and *Angels Wear White*. There is a genre of films called “qingchun films,” popular in both mainland China and Taiwan in recent years, that is greatly different from western teen romances (Qian, 35). Out of many genres including action, adventure and science fiction films that are representative of commercial films and conventionally considered to be male-dominant, “qingchun films” seem to be the only genre of films with apparent female characteristics and that mainly target female spectators that are expected to survive in the

intense market competition in mainland China. From *So Young* (Zhi wo men zhong jiang shi qu de qing chun, Zhao Wei, 2013) to *Our Times* (Wo de shao nv shi dai, Frankie Chen, 2017), dozens of qingchun films have achieved commercial success in mainland China. One film worth mentioning would be *Better Days* (Shaonian de ni, Derek Tsang, 2019), which earned 1.558 billion yuan (approximately 237 million US dollars) at the box office with a rather low budget. Its earnings ranked ninth among all movies released in mainland China in the year of 2019 and is seen as a huge commercial success. Representative of Hong Kong, the film even won an Oscar nomination for International Feature Film.

Most Chinese teen romances that have achieved commercial success have highly similar stories: high school or college students as protagonists; the concepts of having a crush and first love; comic elements combined with a sense of melancholy for fleeting youth, and a retrospective perspective.

“Qingchun”, in Chinese, means youth. There are two commonly used English translations for “qingchun films” in China: “teen romances” and “coming-of-age films,” both of which try to relate “qingchun films” with a genre already existent in the West. Most “qingchun films” that achieved commercial success in mainland China were more like teen romances.

It is intriguing that *Jia nian hua*, the Chinese title of *Angels Wear White*, also has twofold meanings, like *Guo chun tian*, the meaning of which has been discussed earlier. In Chinese, “Jia nian hua” could be understood as either carnival or the best times of one’s life, which is youth in this case. So, the titles of both *The Crossing* and *Angels Wear White* connote youth in such a way that they could also be seen as qingchun films, since “qingchun” literally

represents youth. However, both *The Crossing* and *Angels Wear White* are closer to coming-of-age films in terms of their restrained handling of plots and the detailed description of the process of personal growth of the teenage protagonists.

In an interview with Chen Chen, Bai Xue, the director of *The Crossing*, responded to the question of what she thinks the differences are between her film and other older qingchun films:

I did not intend this film to be a qingchun film... It (the film) just happens to be a story about this period of personal growth, whose protagonist happens to be a teenager. Many people have asked me this question, and there are even people saying that this film marks a new era for qingchun films. But I haven't watched as many qingchun films, and I have no idea what a qingchun film made in an old era was like... The protagonist is a young girl who bears complex social background of this era, which is different from other qingchun films. She is a character with depths instead of a common teenage girl.

In *The Crossing*, Peipei experiences her growth as her crime of smuggling continues, trying to search for her identity and personal value. She finally reaches a reconciliation with both herself and her mother when all illusions vanish, and when all adventures come to an end. In *Angels Wear White*, the two protagonists, Xiaomi and Xiaowen, also experience their own personal growth. Xiaowen, as a sexual assault victim, in the end overcomes the sufferings and learns to get along with her father. And Xiaomi, as an underaged illegal worker with no personal identification, gains gender consciousness in the process of witnessing and being involved in the case. The difference between the two films is that the *Angels Wear*

White protagonists' growth carries more gendered meanings in that the sufferings and awareness related to their growth are exclusive for females. But for Peipei in *The Crossing*, her identity crisis comes from the inconsistency between her citizenship and lifestyle, and is thus more related to socio-geographical reasons.

Since both films are about teenagers and involve criminal elements, they could be sensitive in getting past censorship. It is true that both *The Crossing* and *Angels Wear White* have triggered discussion on censorship among audiences. There is no direct depiction of whether Peipei is sentenced or how she is legally punished. Instead, after Peipei is granted bail, the storyline pauses for a moment and some subtitles appear on screen (See Picture 6). A number of audiences feel that this way of ending the story is too sudden, and see the ending of *The Crossing* as the result of censorship. Bai Xue denied this “rumor”, claiming that it is normal to take artistic license with some constraints. But even without the censorship and just for her playwriting, she would have Peipei caught by the police because this is an important transitional point for Peipei to find out that her life could be different.

On the other hand, Vivian Qu did not deny that she made some revisions in order to get



Picture 6 Subtitles in *The Crossing*

past censorship. According to an online film review by the user of Hanzhiquejing on Douban,

one of the biggest film review websites in China, in the original screenplay, the criminal is not brought to justice. Another difference is that in the version publicly shown in mainland China, the volume of the radio is apparently louder when the news of the seminar is reported. From the differences people could see how film censorship is still a huge consideration and challenge for mainland filmmakers and screenwriters.

Chapter 2: *Dear Ex* and *Love Education*: Absent Men, Relationship crises, and Melodrama

Both directed by Taiwanese Female Directors, *Dear Ex* (Mag Hsu and Chih-Yen Hsu, 2018) and *Love Education* (Sylvia Chang, 2017) are two films featuring female protagonists older than the two films discussed in the first chapter. Having melodramatic elements and middle-aged female protagonists that are commonly seen in regular Chinese nuclear families, the stories *Dear Ex* and *Love Education* touch upon are less adventurous and more realistic.

***Dear Ex*: The Question Unanswered**

Dear Ex is about what happened between three men and a woman. The female protagonist in the story, Liu San-lien, is a middle-aged professional woman. The story begins when her husband Sung Cheng-yuan dies of cancer and leaves all his insurance benefits to his homosexual lover, Jay, a low-income theater director who is considered by Liu San-lien as “the other man” who destroys her marriage. Liu San-lien wants the insurance benefits to cover the tuition for her son with Sung Cheng-yuan, Sung Cheng-hsi. However, Sung Cheng-hsi is in his adolescence and tries to rebel against his mother. Once again after arguing with Liu San-lien when he finds out that Liu throws out all the stuff his father has left him, Sung Cheng-hsi runs away from home to his mother’s biggest enemy, his father’s lover Jay.

After living together for several days and getting to know Jay’s love story with Sung Cheng-yuan, Sung Cheng-hsi begins to get along with Jay. Seeing her son unwilling to come home, Liu San-lien starts to visit Jay’s apartment regularly to do the cleaning so that Sung

Cheng-hsi's allergy to dust mites will not be triggered. During one of Liu San-lien's visits to Jay's apartment, she accidentally meets Jay's mother, who is unaware of her son's homosexual orientation and mistakenly believes that Liu San-lien is her son's girlfriend. After making a scene at Jay's workplace, but still failing to claim the insurance money from Jay and being despised by Sung Cheng-hsi, Liu San-lien seeks revenge by revealing Jay's homosexual identity to his mother.

One day when Jay is beaten up by his creditors, Sung Cheng-hsi calls Liu San-lien for help. Liu San-lien therefore finds out that Jay is in debt because he paid for Sung Cheng-yuan's medical expenses. In the end, Jay struggles to complete his theatrical performance. Liu San-lien, Sung Cheng-hsi and Jay's mother all appear at the performance, resulting in a happy ending because the characters understand each other's positions.

Dear Ex, the English title of the film, could be understood from both Liu San-lien and Jay's positions. On the one hand, Jay was Sung Cheng-yuan's ex-boyfriend because Sung Cheng-yuan decided to take "a normal path" and marry Liu San-lien, so he ended his relationship with Jay. Only when Sung Cheng-yuan is diagnosed with cancer does he return to Jay, taking him as his only true love. On the other hand, after Sung Cheng-yuan leaves Liu San-lien for Jay, Liu San-lien could be considered as Sung Cheng-yuan's ex-wife, not to mention that Sung Cheng-yuan passes away shortly after the break-up. Therefore, Sung Cheng-yuan is both Jay's and Liu San-lien's ex-lover.

The Chinese title of the film *Shei xian ai shang ta de* could be literally translated as *Who Started Loving Him First*. The whole film revolves around this question that is hidden under Liu San-lien and Jay's competition for the insurance money. What the two people fight for is

not the money, but actually Sung Cheng-yuan's love and the legitimacy of their love for Sung. The story is narrated by Sung Cheng-hsi's voice-over from the beginning to the end, implying that it is told by a neutral third party who takes neither Liu San-lien's nor Jay's side. The film presents a story within which all parties' standpoints are understandable. The only thing to blame is the heterosexual relationship/marriage model that is regarded as the only norm in a patriarchal society.

Liu San-lien is the only female main character in the film. She is an ordinary-looking middle-aged woman who has a seemingly normal marriage and lives in a nuclear family before she finds out that her husband is gay. She is a professional woman, but she does not earn much. She is nagging and emotional. She is protective of her son, seeing him as her only hope, but she always feels that her son does not understand her dedication to their family. Concisely speaking, Liu San-lien is a character who could be commonly seen in both reality and innumerable low-quality soap operas. The only difference is that in most soap operas, Liu San-lien's rival would be a beautiful young woman instead of a good-looking man.

This special situation is the biggest source of dramatic tension and impact in *Dear Ex*. Considering the more repressive official attitudes towards homosexual people in most Eastern societies, not a small number of them choose to conceal their orientation and start heterosexual marriages or relationships in mainland China. According to research conducted by N. Li et al., approximately 50 percent of homosexual people in mainland China are willing to enter a heterosexual marriage, and unimaginable numbers of women have married homosexual men in China (99). Similarly, although Taiwan was the first region to legalize gay marriage in 2019, it still shares Confucian and other patriarchal cultural traditions with

mainland China that hinder homosexual relationships and gay marriage from being accepted by a large proportion of people. Therefore, Liu San-lien's status as the wife of a homosexual man also adds social implications and meanings to the film.

At the end of the film, Liu San-lien appears at the theater to support Jay's play, suggesting a possible reconciliation. Her bond with Sung Cheng-hsi, her son, has been repaired through her generous forgiveness. The story ends with Liu San-lien and Sung Cheng-hsi walking down the road, supposedly on their way back home, eating fried chicken chops together. Liu then sings the song from Jay's play. But is this really a happy ending for her?

As discussed in the earlier paragraphs, the whole storyline of *Dear Ex* revolves around these two questions: 1) Who gets the insurance money? 2) Who started loving him (Sung Cheng-yuan) first, as the title asks? If these two questions are carefully examined, people will realize that Liu San-lien loses both competitions to Jay. Liu San-lien is not the insurance beneficiary in the first place, and the narrative closure is accomplished only through her giving up claim to the money.

As the film continues, the love story between Sung Cheng-yuan and Jay is discovered as Jay is the even earlier lover of Sung Cheng-yuan, which makes Liu San-lien somehow the other woman, the third person in the love story. The answer to the question brought up in the title of the film is rather clear in the story, since Jay and Sung Cheng-yuan start their relationship earlier, as a matter of fact.

Even more unfortunate for Liu San-lien than the fact that she is the other woman in the story according to the timeline would be that it is still to be in doubt whether she has ever

been loved by Sung Cheng-yuan. Liu San-lien brings Sung Cheng-hsi to a psychological counsellor in fear that finding out his father is gay would cause him trauma. Liu San-lien's emotional climax is reached through her seeing the counsellor herself after reviewing her relationship with Sung Cheng-yuan. In that sequence, Liu San-lien says, "I just have one little question. I thought about it for so long. I still can't figure out. Just this one little question. Can you tell me? You're a doctor. You're smart. Can you please tell me?" "Was all of it a lie? Was there no love at all? Not...even a little bit?" Then she bursts into tears, with the questions still not answered.

As Liu San-lien's rival and counterpart, Jay's question to be answered appears when Jay wants to reveal his sexual preference to his family but is refused by Sung Cheng-yuan, who insists that it would make their family sad and worried. Jay says, "I don't understand why she (Jay's mother)'d be sad if I love you." For Jay, the crux lies on the legitimacy of a homosexual relationship and getting people's recognition for it. Unlike Liu San-lien's question, his problem gets solved near the end when his mother appears at the theater with a bouquet and hugs him after the performance, signaling her acceptance of her son's sexual orientation.

In comparison, Liu San-lien's question is still not answered even after the seemingly happy ending. It is reasonable to think that the directors and the screenwriters do not know the answer to Liu San-lien's question themselves. A viewer, after being shown the flashback of some of the cherished moments between Liu San-lien and Sung Cheng-yuan, could not easily answer that question as well. But not being able to answer the question of whether Liu San-lien has ever been loved by Sung Cheng-yuan does not conflict the fact that a viewer

could also be certain, after watching the whole film, that the person Sung Cheng-yuan loves more is Jay. Liu San-lien is not only a loser in the competition. One would even doubt whether she has long been disqualified in this competition when there is no response to her humble request for only “a little bit” of Sung Cheng-yuan’s love. If Sung Cheng-yuan and Jay are victims of patriarchy and heterosexual marriage as the norm, *Dear Ex* at least brings up a possibility that when their family and friends understand them, things will get better. But as the innocent victim of Sung Cheng-yuan’s cheating and lying about his sexual orientation, the only solution for Liu’s distress is to think positively herself, to just get over it, and to come to Jay’s theatrical performance to provide a narrative closure for the story, even though her questions are still answered with silence.

Love Education: Similar Crises for Women of Different Age Groups

Love Education, directed and written by Taiwanese director Sylvia Chang, also describes a feud within a family, but it covers a more diverse spectrum of women, with three female protagonists of different age groups and generations: Nanna (the grandmother), Yue Huiying (the mother), and Weiwei (the daughter).

The story begins with the death of Yue Huiying’s mother after which Yue decides to move her father’s grave from the countryside into the city so that her parents could be buried together. The crux of the matter is her father’s bigamy: Born in a period when the feudal marriage system still existed, Yue Huiying’s father, Yue Zifu, had an arranged marriage with “Nanna” in the country. After about a half-year’s marriage, Yue Zifu comes to the city and meets Yue Huiying’s mother. After the People’s Republic of China is founded, they decide to

initiate another marriage, making it the only marriage recognized by the government. When Yue Zifu and “Granny”, Yue Huiying’s mother, live together as family and bring up Yue Huiying, “Nanna” has been waiting for Yue Zifu to come back to the country. After Yue Zifu dies, his grave is set in his hometown, the village where he and “Nanna” lived together. But “Nanna” violently opposes Yue Huiying’s idea of moving his grave to the city because she still sees Yue Zifu as her husband and lover.

The film features three female protagonists of different age groups. “Nanna”, who does not even have her own name except for “Mrs. Yue”, is a senior born around 1930. She is stubborn and unwilling to let Yue Huiying move Yue Zifu’s grave. Yue Huiying is around 55 years old and is soon to retire as a high school Chinese teacher. She is married to Yin Xiaoping, a driving coach, with whom she raises her daughter Weiwei. Weiwei works in a television station as a program editor. She has a relationship with a bar singer Da, who intended to go to Beijing but decides to stay with his girlfriend in the city of Xi’an. Since Weiwei works with society news, some of her recordings of her family’s visit to the village and the conflicts between her mother and “Nanna” catch her colleagues’ attention. They decide to shoot a feature story about this incident. After visiting Nanna several times, Weiwei and Nanna start to build a bond like a real pair of grandmother and granddaughter. Weiwei changes her mind and sympathizes with Nanna as she gets to know more about Nanna’s story with her grandfather.

When Weiwei visits the village for the first time with her parents, the first thing they see at the entrance is a chastity arch (See Picture 7), which has never been seen by a young female like Weiwei. Then Weiwei reads out the words inscribed on the arch: “Keep a

woman's chastity. Fulfil her duty. Be a good mother. Honour her widowhood." After reading the inscription, she asks her mother, who should be familiar with ancient Chinese, the meaning of the inscriptions. "It means it's tough to be a woman", answers Huiying.

Different locations the three female protagonists appear seem to set up different keynotes for the three characters. Nanna, being kept in a village whose entrance entrenched the chastity arch for her whole life, her sphere of activity is confined within her own cottage, inside of



Picture 7 The chastity arch entrenched at the entrance to the village

which a coffin is set right beside her bed. The space she occupies seems to be much constrained, with the limited space full of rural and feudal symbols. The three kinds of locations Huiying are spotted most often are: the high school as her workplace, her house where she lives with her husband and daughter, and different civilian authorities and archival institutions where she strives vainly to obtain proof of her parents' marriage. Huiying is not only a teacher in her workplace, but also takes an educational role in her husband's and daughter's life. Her preaching leads to conflict with her daughter in the second half of the

film. The film portrays how life could also be difficult for an urbanite when people see that Huiying circulates among all kinds of agencies and government departments, with her life being influenced and controlled by these “civilized” authorities.

There is no doubt that Weiwei, as the youngest protagonist in the story, would appear in most modern locations. She works in a television station, surrounded by television screens and different electronic devices. Her appearances in the bar represent a rather fashionable kind of life young people live. In the first half of the film, Weiwei and Huiying share a same living place, while in the second half, after several conflicts between the pair of mother and daughter, Weiwei decides to move out her parents’ house and live together with her boyfriend Da. She even attempts to steal out her hukou¹ in order to register marriage with Da. The separation of the living places between Huiying and Weiwei indeed shows the conflicts ingrained in their different lifestyles, representing different generations.

Although the three female protagonists clearly represent different age groups, with different lifestyles and outlooks on love, it is interesting that Nanna, Huiying and Weiwei all encounter similar problems in the story.

Suffering from midlife crisis and menopause, Huiying is suspicious that Xiaoping, her husband, is having an affair with his student, Mrs. Wang, who is clumsy when driving but is treated by Xiaoping with kindness and patience. Weiwei, in love with Da, is also alert to Zhu Yin, a single mother who works in the same bar with Da and has such a close relationship with Da that her son even calls Da his “Daddy Da”. Nanna’s story, apparently as the film’s main storyline, is her being caught in a love triangle with Huiying’s parents.

¹ A kind of certificate for a registered permanent residence of a household which is needed when people register their marriage in the PRC.

Nanna, Huiying, and Weiwei choose different ways to cope with their love crises. Nanna waits her whole life for Grandpa to come back, while what comes back is only Grandpa's corpse. It is actually difficult to understand whether what Nanna has for Grandpa is love, or is it only that the idea for women to be chaste is so ingrained in her mind that she has no other choice but to stay in her cottage and wait for her husband to come back. It is certain, though, that even Grandpa's dead body is something she could rely on to live on as a spiritual anchor. Outliving Grandpa and getting to keep his grave in the country could be her victory in this battle for love.

The relationship between Huiying and Xiaoping is rather interesting. Huiying suspects that her husband Xiaoping is having an affair with his student in the driving school, Mrs. Wang. But the affair turns out not to be true. While suspecting Xiaoping and Mrs. Wang's relationship, Huiying herself experiences some different feelings for the father of one of her students. When Lu Xiaoguang, the student of Yue Huiying, is playing soccer, the ball hits Yue Huiying's head and she collapses. Then Yue Huiying falls asleep and one young man appears in her dream to reach out his hand to her, like Prince Charming. While Yue is immersed in sleep, Lu Xiaoguang's father appears and apologizes for his son.

Although it is not clearly pointed out, one has reason to believe that Yue Huiying takes Lu Xiaoguang's father as a substitute for the young man who appeared in her dream, and somehow develops ambiguous feelings for Lu Xiaoguang's father. Yue Huiying's love crisis is thus twofold. She at the same time doubts her love for Xiaoping and Xiaoping's love for her.

The truth is disclosed only close to the end of the film when Xiaoping drives a new car to

pick up Huiying at her workplace. In the car Xiaoping reminisces about their youths and their plan to take a ride together after retirement. After hearing Xiaoping's words, Huiying suddenly bursts into tears, telling him about the dream she had. She says, "I dreamt of a man's face. But I couldn't remember who he was. Later it dawned on me... It was you when you were young. I won't allow Mrs. Wang to sit in this car!" The background music echoes the song Xiaoping and Huiying heard when they traveled to Beijing in their twenties. It turns out the crisis for Huiying and Xiaoping is only a misunderstanding: they have been faithful to each other.

When Da decides to go to Beijing, Weiwei chooses to end her relationship with Da and moves back to her parents' house. Before Da leaves, Weiwei tells him that she will not wait for him anymore. Nevertheless, when Weiwei tells Huiying about the end of her relationship, she is ambivalent regarding her attitudes toward Da, saying she is still willing to wait for him for the rest of her life.

Then she becomes uncertain and asks Huiying, "How long would that be then?" Her answer and question obviously correspond with Nanna's life-long wait for Grandpa. When Weiwei jokingly promises to wait for Da for the rest of her life like Nanna, Nanna, on the contrary, decides at the very end of the film to give up waiting. She decides to have Grandpa's body dug out and sent to the city. With sorrow she touches Grandpa's long buried bones and says unhesitatingly, "I don't want you anymore. Go to the city!"

With all three female protagonists encountering a same kind of problem and experiencing similar love crises in *Love Education*, whose Chinese title means to love and to be close to each other, it is natural to think that the film aims to portray how women of different

generations handle similar relationship crises differently.

However, the ending of the film shows a sense of ambiguity in these female characters' coping methods, which are supposed to be different. The dramatic reconciliation between Huiying and Xiaoping is based on the fact that the crisis in their relationship is but a misunderstanding. Weiwei, the youngest and most fashionable woman, is willing to wait for Da for the rest of her life, though tentatively and jokingly. Meanwhile Nanna, who is set in the most rural and uncivilized surroundings, decides to end her lifelong waiting. After watching the film, one wonders whether essential differences do exist between the three female protagonists, regardless of their ages and surroundings. What does it mean to undergo this education of love?

Variants of Taiwanese Melodrama: The Feud, Love Triangle, and the Absent Man

With different ways of storytelling, *Dear Ex* and *Love Education* portray similar character relations. In both stories, a love triangle is formed which includes the husband, the wife, and the other man/woman. This kind of relationship formation is commonly seen in many traditional Chinese melodramas. In Zhu's article (68-73), he specifically points out how *Dear Ex* is highly similar to traditional family melodrama movies. In *Love Education*, there are even three love triangles, one for each of the three female protagonists of different age groups. And there are similarities especially between the love triangle formed by Sung Cheng-yuan, Liu San-lien, and Jay, and the love triangle formed by Nanna, Grandpa, and Grandma. Both triangular relationships include a deceased man, a first wife, and a so-called "mistress" who is truly loved by the deceased man. Also, in both stories, there are

complexities within the triangular relationship concerning whether the other man/woman is really a mistress.

In *Dear Ex*, as discussed earlier, Jay started a relationship with Sung Cheng-yuan even earlier than Liu San-lien begins her marriage with Sung Cheng-yuan, which makes Liu the other woman for Jay. In *Love Education*, for specific temporal and political reasons, although Nanna and Grandpa had a de facto marriage arranged by their family, what Grandpa and Granny have is a lawful marriage recognized and licensed by the government, which makes Granny not a conventional “mistress” either.

In the beginning sequence of *Dear Ex*, Liu San-lien rushes to Jay’s apartment and insists that Sung Cheng-hsi should be the legitimate beneficiary of the insurance benefits. She calls Jay “a shameless mistress”. In Mandarin, she calls Jay a “xiaosan”, which literally means “the third” person involved in a marriage or a relationship. Suddenly, Jay’s cell phone starts to ring. The ringtone he uses is a recording of Sung Cheng-yuan calling Jay his “hubby”. Jay then turns to Liu San-lien and asks her, “Tell me, who’s the mistress (xiaosan) now?”

Similarly, there is discussion in *Love Education* regarding whether Granny should be considered as a mistress between Huiying and Weiwei. Weiwei, in a hotel room searching online, says that “If Nanna was Grandpa’s wife, then Granny was his mistress. A mistress’s child is... Is it called... Illegitimate heir?” “That’s what they call the sons. Just ‘born out of wedlock’. Stop talking nonsense. It was an arranged marriage between Nanna and Grandpa. It wasn’t lawful at all,” answers Huiying. On the live show featuring Nanna and Yue Huiying’s feud over Grandpa’s grave, Huiying gives her speech: “Nanna, my mother was my father’s one and only lawful wife. They loved each other... and got married. They loved each other

all their life together. As far as I remember, they never raised their voice when speaking to each other. It's only natural they should be buried together. Can you understand a daughter's feelings?"

In both cases, the feuds are possible only because there is discrepancy between the person one man truly loves and the person that he should take family responsibilities for. As love and marriage are naturally believed to coincide as one, *Dear Ex* and *Love Education* show other possibilities.

By fighting for the insurance money with Jay and accusing Jay as the third party in the love story, what Liu San-lien really fights for is her legitimacy as Sung Cheng-yuan's wife and lover, as if Sung's love is first come first served. In a similar way, the feud over the grave between Nanna and Yue Huiying is essentially a feud over the legitimacy and recognition of Nanna's and Granny's marriages with Grandpa. Yue Huiying is reluctant to acknowledge that she could be considered as a daughter "born out of wedlock". The discrepancy between the role of the lover and the (at least original) wife explains how heterosexual monogamy is but a social system under the shadow of patriarchal ideology, and the essence of marriage could be deceptive and questionable.

To explore this idea, it is useful to examine the roles of the males, especially the deceased husbands, in the two stories. In both stories, the husband is dead, but still exerts huge influence on the alive ones. In *Dear Ex*, the flashback memories with Sung Cheng-yuan appear repeatedly and haunt the three protagonists that are still alive: Sung Cheng-hsi, Liu San-lien, and Jay. Jay struggles to finish the theatrical play through which he and Sung Cheng-yuan met each other, even with a broken leg. Sung Cheng-hsi runs away from home

because Liu San-lien says that she has thrown away the stuff Sung Cheng-yuan left to him.

Liu San-lien keeps recalling the wonderful memories she had with Sung Cheng-yuan, trying to search for a hint of love in those memories. Though deceased, Sung Cheng-yuan is still the man who takes the dominant position in his family and romantic relationships.

Although Grandpa was absent for most time of Nanna's life, he exerts his dominance and influence in his own way, too. Nanna embroiders Grandpa's name in ancient characters used by women in her hometown and hangs it on the wall in her living room as a substitute for Grandpa's photo. The framed image of Grandpa's embroidered name is like Grandpa's gaze in Nanna's cottage. Nanna keeps the letters Grandpa sent to her when he lived in the city with Granny. In the letters Grandpa told her about his work and sent expenses.

The letters, according to Weiwei, are letters to family instead of love letters. But for Nanna, Grandpa's sending five extra dollars to her for a new coat is enough as a proof of his love for her. When Weiwei says that what Grandpa has for Nanna is different from what he has for Granny, Nanna answers only, "He always sent me money!" The letters contrast with the love letters Grandpa sent to Granny, in which he says, "Shuhui, it's been three months since you went to study in Beijing. Last night, the orchid cacti in the garden blossomed. They turn out to be so beautiful. Our little girl has begun losing her baby teeth...I'm afraid the happiness we have now will be as short-lived as the orchid cacti...I miss you! Shuhui, please come home soon!"

The turning point of Nanna's attitude appears when Nanna visits Huiying and Weiwei's house and sees the family pictures Grandpa and Granny took together. When Nanna goes back to the village, Weiwei sends a photoshopped photograph of Nanna and Grandpa. The

photo gets wet in the pouring rain, and Grandpa's face gets blurred when Nanna tries to wipe it away. Grandpa's letters and couple photos with Granny not only show his love for her, but also prove that he is able to recognize a woman's position in his life.

All three men in *Love Education* adhere to their life choices, without much consideration for their female partners. Grandpa settles in the city with Granny and leaves his original wife in the country. Xiaoping, after buying a new car, insists on taking a long-distance ride even if Huiying is unwilling to go with him. Da decides to leave Xi'an and continue his dream-chasing in Beijing.

In a similar manner in *Dear Ex*, unlike the free-spirited Jay, Liu San-lien lives a rigid and dull life, taking her son as the only focus of her life. The freest decision she makes, until the end of the film, is to buy chicken chops instead of having healthy food.

The absent men are never really absent as long as women are still being shadowed under their dominance in making life decisions and giving recognition. And when men are present, situations would get even worse. Though with melodramatic elements and tension, both films of *Dear Ex* and *Love Education* depict contemporary Chinese women's lives quite realistically. With a large of proportion of professional women in both mainland China and Taiwan, women are seemingly equipped with ability to be independent, but are still commonly in a dominated position, longing for recognition.

Chapter 3: *Song of the Exile* and *The Farewell*: Post-Colonial and Immigrant Dilemmas

The Chinese diaspora is an important and indispensable contributor to both Chinese culture and cross-cultural communication, considering the complicated political and historical circumstances regarding Greater China and the large population of Chinese emigrants. Ann Hui and Lulu Wang, whose works figure in this chapter, are two female directors who have more diverse family and educational backgrounds than the directors discussed in earlier chapters. Accordingly, the two films chosen, *Song of the Exile* and *The Farewell*, are relevant to their diasporic experiences. The search for belonging and cross-cultural communication are the core elements in the two films.

***Song of the Exile*: A Spectrum of Different Hometowns**

Ann Hui was born in Anshan, Liaoning Province in China, when the Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang were still competing for the leadership of the vast land of mainland China. When Ann Hui was two months old, she moved to Macau with her parents. In 1949, her father moved to Hong Kong for a job, leaving Ann Hui in Macau with her mother and grandparents. When she was five years old, her grandparents moved back to Guangzhou, a southeastern city in China, and Ann Hui moved to Hong Kong to live with her parents. After graduating from Hong Kong University, she studied in the London Film School, adding more international elements to her. These aspects of her early years are clearly depicted in *Song of the Exile*, a semi-biographical film.

The story of *Song of the Exile*, though, is not only focused on Ann Hui's personal experiences, but also on how her mother, Aiko, a woman whose Japanese identity was hardly known by her daughter Hueyin, reconciles with Hueyin after they visit her homeland in Japan together. Hueyin, sharing a similar growing up environment and educational background with Ann Hui, is the narrator of the story.

The geographical elements in *Song of the Exile* are significant and noteworthy. Ann Hui's memories with the important cities in her life are shown through her migration from one city to another. Since the film is not strictly in chronological order, Hueyin's fragmented memories are inserted and triggered by certain incidents.

The film begins with Hueyin riding a bicycle with her friends in London, with melodious English background music. After graduation, she returns to Hong Kong to attend her younger sister's wedding. While the three women prepare for the wedding, the conflicts between Hueyin and Aiko, Hueyin's mother, appear for the first time. The quarrel between the mother and the daughter triggers Hueyin's childhood memories in Macau.

In those memories of Hueyin's childhood, as Hueyin narrates them, her mother was a silent and serious woman. She did not have an intimate relationship with her mother, as she did with her grandparents, who were always kind to her. Through young Hueyin's point of view, the audience detects the hidden disharmony between her grandmother and mother. Hueyin lay at the center of the two women's feud about the food she ate and her haircut.

The background music for Hueyin's childhood flashbacks is a traditional Cantonese song Hueyin's grandparents listened to when they took a nap in summer days. The title of the Cantonese Song, *Ke tu qiu hen*, is also used as the Chinese title for *Song of the Exile*.

According to Audrey Yue, the title of the song could be literally translated as *Guest Route Autumn Regret* (1). The use of different background music clearly portrays different cultural contexts.

Hueyin's flashback continues. Because of her close relationship with her grandparents, Hueyin chose to stay in Macau with them instead of traveling to Hong Kong with her parents. However, in 1963, Hueyin's grandparents moved back to Guangzhou because they still had deep feelings for their homeland. Therefore, Hueyin had no choice but to move to Hong Kong to live with her parents with whom she is actually unfamiliar. Only after she argued with her father about her mother's behavior at home did she know that her mother is ethnically a Japanese. In the post-Second World War period, Chinese still have high anti-Japanese sentiments, and Hueyin's mother had suffered much as a Japanese who could barely speak Mandarin and Cantonese.

Subsequently, Hueyin accompanies Aiko to visit her hometown in Japan. Unlike the first part of the film which is interspersed with Hueyin's childhood and teenage flashbacks, the second part -- Aiko's return to her hometown -- portrays Aiko's memories instead of Hueyin's.

Since Hueyin narrates the story, Aiko's life experiences in her early years are traced through Hueyin's contacting and conversing with Aiko's family and old friends. Hueyin does not speak Japanese, so the words have to be translated for her to understand. Her only translators are her mother and her oldest uncle. Like her uncle's not-so-fluent Mandarin, Aiko's teenage anecdotes she hears from her uncle and the childhood pictures she sees in the family album are only fragments of her story instead of a complete version of her early life

experience.

Near the end of the film, Aiko schedules a meeting with her younger brother who has conflicts with both Aiko and Aiko's oldest brother. When Hueyin asks her oldest uncle why they do not get along, he answers, "Because he is still at war." It turns out that Aiko's younger brother was a soldier during the Second World War, and he still blames his sister for betraying their country.

The only sequence in the film that shows a story when Hueyin is absent appears later, when Aiko reminisces about her first encounter with Hueyin's father. It was still during the Second World War, when Aiko followed her brother to Manchukuo and was helped by Hueyin's father, a Chinese translator who speaks Japanese. Through this visit to Japan, Hueyin reconciles with Aiko and starts to understand her mother's feelings because the mother and the daughter share similar experiences of leaving their homeland, living in an unfamiliar environment and being separated from their family, which makes even basic communication a problem.

After the travel, Hueyin and Aiko come back to Hong Kong. Hueyin gets a job in a television station, working on a documentary regarding the ongoing protests against corruption in Hong Kong. Her grandfather has a stroke. To visit him, she travels to Guangzhou. It is the first time in the whole film that a mainland city appears. The Cultural Revolution is going on in mainland China at the time, and Hueyin's grandfather's stroke is triggered when some Red Guards question him when he is caught with a collection of Song Ci in his hand. Lying on his bed, Hueyin's grandfather says to Hueyin, "Hueyin, don't be disappointed at China. Grandpa is old, but you are still young. We rest our hopes on you."

The ending thus adds political implications to the film.

The Farewell: An Imagined Hometown

While *Song of the Exile* features mother-daughter reconciliation, *The Farewell* features the reunion of grandmother and granddaughter. Similarly, *The Farewell* is based on the director's personal experiences. Born in Beijing, Lulu Wang, the director, moved to the United States when she was six years old. The story of *The Farewell* is therefore that of a Chinese American immigrant family.

The protagonists of *The Farewell* are the grandmother-granddaughter pair. The granddaughter Billi, like Lulu Wang, moved to the United States with her parents at a very young age. Still, she has a very deep connection with her Nai Nai (grandmother) since she used to spend her childhood with her. Billi finds out through her parents that Nai Nai has been diagnosed with stage-four lung cancer with only three months to live, but the results are hidden from Nai Nai by the family in order not to startle Nai Nai and worsen her condition. Instead, the family plan to hold a fake wedding for Billi's cousin, Haohao, and his Japanese girlfriend Aiko so that the whole family could have an excuse to reunite to visit Nai Nai one last time.

The structure of the big family is complicated. Billi and her parents immigrated to the United States when Billi was six years old. Shortly after Billi's and her parents' immigration, Billi's uncle immigrated to Japan. When the whole family get together to have a meal for the first time after Nai Nai was diagnosed, Nai Nai assesses her grandchildren's personalities. She thinks that Billi is a very independent and strong lady, "not just someone who just

follows everyone else”, while Haohao has been very sensitive. Nai Nai labels Billi and Haohao with labels Chinese people have for Americans and Japanese. The sequence seems to suggest how different cultural environments have shaped Billi and Haohao differently. The reunion of the family actually indicates the ensuing conflicts, communication and integration between different cultures.

Billi suffers from culture shock and conflicts through the whole film. When Billi checks in the hotel, she is uncomfortable with the hotel clerk, who curiously asks Billi about her feelings for China and the United States. When she wants to drink some water in the hotel, there is no bottled water but only a boiler for her to use. When she follows her grandmother to do morning exercises, Nai Nai asks Billi to shout out “Ha!” so that “the bad toxins” will be cleared out. When Billi is taken by her aunt to a massage parlor, her aunt orders a kind of service called “cupping” for her. In traditional Chinese medical theory, cupping is seen as a means of therapy.

The most crucial conflict in the film, as the Chinese title *Bie gao su ta* (literally translated as *Do Not Tell Her*) of the film reveals, is how Billi’s opinion is different from her family regarding whether to tell Nai Nai about her diagnosis. Billi repeatedly expresses that she is not supportive of her family’s choice. In her opinion, Nai Nai should know about her own condition in case she wants to say goodbye. Concealing the truth is illegal and in essence a lie, regardless of the family’s good intention. Still, the whole family think it is inappropriate for Nai Nai to go through the sadness and pain. What is more important for Nai Nai is to act as usual and keep her good mood.

When Billi finds out that Nai Nai has sent her attendant to the hospital to pick up her test

results after the wedding, Billi voluntarily rushes to the hospital at full speed. In a small print shop by the street, Billi and Little Nai Nai (Nai Nai's younger sister) changes the test results. The changed version shows that Nai Nai's condition is benign. Unlike what an audience would expect, Billi does not tell Nai Nai about her situation until the very end. On the contrary, she becomes a part of the deception as well.

When Billi travels to China to visit Nai Nai, she is experiencing a low point in her life. She has received a rejection letter for a Guggenheim scholarship and is struggling with paying her rent. After going back to the United States, standing in a stream of pedestrians in the New York City, Billi shouts out "Ha!" loudly, imitating Nai Nai when Nai Nai does morning exercises.

Following the last sequence of the film is an extra video of Lulu Wang's real-life grandmother, the supposed inspiration for *The Farewell*. The subtitles read, "Six years after her diagnosis, Nai Nai is still with us." Judging from the way how Billi gains strength and the happy ending of a medical miracle for Nai Nai, it seems that the mysterious Chinese philosophy is seizing advantage, although it may seem absurd in the beginning.

Given that in the U.S. the film won a Golden Globe Award for Best Actress (Musical or Comedy) and a nomination for Best Picture (Foreign Language), its not-so-desirable reception in mainland China precisely highlights the dilemma for an immigrant director.

On China's most popular movie-scoring website, Douban,² *The Farewell* scores 7.3/10, a rather low score for an award-winning film. In comparison, the winner of Best Picture (Foreign Language), *Parasite* (Bong Joon-ho, 2019), scores 8.7/10. The three other films

² www.douban.com. Accessed 29 March 2021.

nominated for the same category, *Les Misérables* (Ladj Ly, 2019), *Pain and Glory* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2019), and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Céline Sciamma, 2019) respectively score 8.1/10, 8.5/10 and 8.6/10. While the latest film before *The Farewell* that has won a nomination for Best Picture (Foreign Language) using Chinese as its primary language, *The Flowers of War* (Zhang Yimou, 2011), scores 8.2/10.

Lulu Wang chose to shoot *The Farewell* in a northeastern city in China, Changchun, where she once lived with her grandma. It is a coincidence that Changchun is also my own hometown, a city I grew up and lived in for approximately twenty years. It is an unexpected pleasure just to look at those landmarks in Changchun and to see the protagonists get lost on the same bridge that I had to pass every day to get to my middle school. Being set in a city that I am extremely familiar with makes the incongruities in the film more noticeable.

When Billi asks her parent why they think it is better not to tell Nai Nai, Billi's mother answers, "Chinese people have saying, 'When people get cancer, they die.' It's not the cancer that kills them, it's the fear." Actually, no Chinese sayings that have similar meanings occur to me. Billi's mother's explanation for the saying is unnatural for a native Chinese. The hotel clerk who helps Billi with her luggage and asks too many questions is also a character unlikely to appear in reality. Haohao and Aiko's wedding hall is covered with blue, a rarely seen color in a traditional Chinese wedding organized by an aged lady. Instead, there is no red, a most commonly used color for a Chinese wedding. Most importantly, Awkwafina, the lead actress in *The Farewell* who plays Billi, is not a native Chinese speaker. Her Chinese speaking does not sound like a girl who grew up in China until she was six years old. Above mentioned are only some details that could help explain why native Chinese might feel not as

immersive while watching *The Farewell*. The conversations that are purposely contrived to show cultural differences and conflicts, the unnatural scene design and the unconvincing casting make it rather difficult for Chinese audiences to empathize with the film.

***Song of the Exile* and *The Farewell*: Nostalgia, Familial Bonds, and Cross-Cultural Dilemmas**

Another recently shown film in China, *Mulan* (Niki Caro, 2020), is useful for opening this section. Starring some of the most famous actors in China and directed by Zelanian director Niki Caro, the film is produced by Walt Disney Pictures with a high budget.

The character of Mulan, a traditional Chinese heroine, is advertised as the first East Asian and Chinese Disney Princess. The film grossed 278 million Yuan (approximately 42.7 million US dollars) in mainland China, a low figure even considering the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. In comparison, its rivals, *The Eight Hundred* (Guan Hu, 2020) and *Tenet* (Christopher Nolan, 2020), separately grossed 3.11 billion Yuan (approximately 478 million US dollars) and 456 million Yuan (approximately 70 million US dollars). Chinese film reviewers and critics attribute *Mulan*'s lower-than-expected box office to its poor quality (scoring 5.0/10 on Douban), and most negative comments revolve around *Mulan*'s misuse of traditional Chinese elements and its misunderstandings of the traditional Chinese heroine. The film is criticized for being made through westerners' orientalist lenses, full of western illusions and cultural inaccuracies.

In both *Song of the Exile* and *The Farewell*, rediscovery of one's homeland is one of the most important motifs. The characters of Aiko, Hueyin, and Billi's family all go through the

process of revisiting their homelands. During their visits, the protagonists all experience a sense of displacement, not only geographically, but also culturally. And the reception of *The Farewell* in China exactly testifies to the dilemma for diasporic, especially emigrant directors, when the film faces a similar situation with *Mulan*, a film made by an ethnically Western female director. The incongruent elements in *The Farewell* are but another form of proof of the cultural displacement of the director. Being highly recognized in the American awards season has further complicated the situation.

Since *The Farewell* is based on Lulu Wang's personal experience, the director's personal interpretation of the film is especially pertinent. In an interview, Lulu Wang said,

I always felt the divide in my relationship to my family versus my relationship to my classmates and to my colleagues and to the world that I inhabit. That's just the nature of being an immigrant and straddling two cultures...

This particular story resonated with me because of that, the main character has to go back to China and there are all these different layers of China. There's Chinese and American generational culture, and there are different degrees of American culture. There's the Chinese grandmother who grew up with the Communist Army, the uncle who moved from China to Japan — so it's still Asian culture, but with certain differences. In “The Farewell”, I really wanted to explore the nuances of those gaps between these different family members. One thing that unites them is the love of the grandmother.

In *The Farewell*, as discussed earlier, Chinese culture seems to prevail, considering the Chinese way of not telling Nai Nai about her disease is in the end the correct choice, and how

Billi has gained strength through her journey back to China. Yet the differing receptions of the film in the United States and mainland China takes an opposite position, when the film is better accepted in the United States and questioned by Chinese audiences. As Lulu Wang describes, an immigrant director “straddles” between different cultures and feels a kind of “divide”, but the place she occupies cannot be exactly in the middle. When the director is culturally closer to her host land, the homeland presented in the film can easily become an imagined homeland, changing the film’s target audience. “The different layers of China and Asian culture” in *The Farewell* unfortunately feel like stereotypes based on the director’s imagination, even when the film is in fact based on her personal experience.

Homeland is handled more subtly and cleverly in *Song of the Exile*, partly due to the different backgrounds of the two protagonists. For both protagonists, it is difficult to specify one city as their hometown among the cities presented in the film, which all carry special memories and stories for the two women.

For Aiko, Japan is her homeland in the beginning. In Hueyin’s flashbacks, Aiko was accused by her mother-in-law of “always eating raw and cold food”. When Aiko and Hueyin arrive in Aiko’s hometown and head to a restaurant, Aiko orders more food than she can eat. Having a lot of Japanese food here signifies Aiko’s long-time accumulated nostalgia for her homeland. Significantly, near the end of their journey Aiko asks Hueyin whether she wants to go home. Aiko then says, “The food here is not good. It’s raw and cold. My stomach can’t stand it. Cantonese dishes are the best. I really want to have some soup.”

The change in Aiko’s eating habits represents the change in her attitudes toward Hong Kong and Japan. Aiko, as a native Japanese, lived in Japan for approximately twenty years

before she traveled to China during the war. For her, a hometown is not a distant and imagined place, but a place with numerous memories. She keeps her Japanese lifestyle even after she has lived in Macau for several years. When she returns to her homeland, what she experiences is not a kind of intense culture shock, but a mixed sense of familiarity and unfamiliarity. Longing for Japanese food for such a long time, Aiko in the end misses Cantonese food as well. Meanwhile, she experiences cultural inconsistencies and develops deep feelings for both places.

For Hueyin, the situation is even more complicated. The choice she has to make is not only between two cities. In the film, there are five places that she has visited or lived in: Macau, Hong Kong, London, Yufu-shi in Japan, and Guangzhou in mainland China. Macau is the city where she has the happiest childhood memories. Hong Kong is the city where she reunites with her parents and sister, and also the city she chooses to settle in with her job in the television station. London is the city where she pursues her master's degree and makes friends. Yufu-shi is Aiko's hometown, which could also be seen as her hometown out of consanguinity. Guangzhou is the city that her grandparents choose to live in with their deep love and genuine hope for a better country, and the hope, as Grandpa says, rests on her. It is thus even more difficult for Hueyin than Aiko to specify one single city as her hometown. In the film, various ways of transportation are stressed by the camera. Migration between these different cities and making connections with different people in each city make Hueyin the person she is.

The substantiality of hometown is therefore to be questioned when Hueyin is trapped in the interstices between different possible "hometowns" while migrating between these cities.

Around her a spectrum of different homelands are formed. Unlike her mother, Hueyin is seen to be adaptable to different cultures, going through several times of migration. Hueyin, similar to her place of residence, Hong Kong, is like a testing ground for different cultures to meet, collide and co-exist. Under the context of post-colonization, Hueyin experiences different levels of geographical and cultural closeness with different places.

There is reason to believe that the character of Hueyin is a metonymy for Hong Kong's post-colonial situation. In one scene when Hueyin is typing her resume, the audience can clearly see how she fills out her information. Her place of birth is Hong Kong, while her nationality is British. With a British nationality, she does not behave exactly like her Western friends and suffers from racial discrimination when she tries to search for a job at a television station in London. On the other hand, when her grandparents choose to move back to mainland, she feels "abandoned by my family" when she is on the ship to Hong Kong.

The separation between Hueyin and her grandparents represents the separation between Hong Kong and mainland China when Hong Kong was ceded as a colony. Like Hueyin, Hong Kong, as a former colony today after being ceded and returned, has been greatly influenced by both western and Chinese culture. Its unique cultural context makes it difficult to be affiliated solely with either side. The post-colonial society of Hong Kong itself is in a state of exile.

Hueyin does not reply to her grandfather's "Don't be disappointed at China" warning. Instead, she stares at Grandpa who is lying in the bed, and questions whether the body of this old man could still bear the weight of his granddaughter. Through Hueyin's attitude people could detect Ann Hui's ambivalent attitude regarding the future of Hong Kong with its return

to the PRC.

In both *Song of the Exile* and *The Farewell*, familial relationships are crucial to the plot. The discussions of the idea of return to one's hometown and cultural collisions are both shown through a pair of families who occupy different cultural positions. As family members who do not share a same kind of culture, both Hueyin's mother and Nai Nai attempt to persuade the two young women to repeat their actions. When Hueyin is still very young and lives with her grandparents, both her grandmother and Aiko want her to eat their kind of food. When Hueyin returns to Hong Kong to attend her sister's wedding, Aiko asks Hueyin to have the same haircut with her, so that they could look like real family. Nai Nai asks Billi to imitate her when she does morning exercises. To make their offspring similar to them is not as only a way of assimilation, but also a way that the elders gain security through their familial relationship.

Actually, the emotional bonds between family members are stronger than they imagine, even with different cultural stands. In *The Farewell*, the biggest disagreement among the family appears during the second family meal. Around a big round dinner table all family members are seated. Billi's aunt and Billi's mother have different attitudes toward the United States. When Billi's mother illustrates her point that America is better than China, Nai Nai stops their debate by saying, "No matter what, you can't criticize China. Don't forget, you're still Chinese." Then Billi's father jokingly replies, "Technically, we're American. I mean, we have American passports." Hearing the words that are supposed to be a joke, all other family members change their facial expressions delicately, showing disagreement. Billi's uncle who has immigrated to Japan swears to always be Chinese, no matter where he lives or what

passport he holds. After the meal, the family return to their hotel, entering separate rooms.

The different rooms these family members enter symbolize the living places that shape them differently.

Yet the family is also united. When Aiko's ring is missing, the whole family get down on the ground to look for it. Though facing different directions, they share the same goal of finding the ring. When Billi successfully switches the test results and Nai Nai is perfectly deceived, a scene of the whole family is shown. Marching out of the hospital towards the camera, all family members have similarly stern expressions (See Picture 8). They appear as



Picture 8 Billi and her family marching out of the hospital

if they are special agents who have just completed an important mission. With disagreements and separation at times, the family's members could still

feel the strong affection for each other.

The Billi's reunites because of their love for Nai Nai, and the family members gain strength from the reunion. Hueyin and Aiko reconcile with each other by travelling together and understanding each other. In *Song of the Exile*, Guangzhou and London are bound with landmarks and cultural icons, while Hong Kong, on the other side, is but a place where home is, with landscape rarely shown. A hometown is a hometown only when one considers her

home to be there. What overcomes nostalgia, cultural shock, and displacement is not the geographical return, but the strong familial bonds and being together with one's family.

Conclusion

Several conclusions could be drawn from the discussion about the six films selected.

Market economy can be a double-edged sword for female directors. When the People's Republic of China was still in the era of planned economy before 1980s, films were made by state-owned enterprises and studios. With the slogan of “Women hold up half the sky” put forward by Mao, female directors who work for the state-owned film studios are given fair opportunities to direct mainstream high-budget films, although with only an extremely limited range of genres and themes.³

With the development of both national market and global market in film business, directors are given more creative freedom. However, in the meantime, the conventionally male-oriented film genres including action films, comedies, and science fiction are considered to be more profitable and are usually directed by males. The creative space for female directors has been squeezed with the pressure of box office and profits. Only very few female directors are given chances to direct high-budget commercial films. All films discussed in this thesis are low-budget films, aiming at a niche market and limited target audience. The selections reflect not only my personal taste, but also the status of female directors within the Chinese film industry.

Female characters are less objectified in female-led films. In male-led and male-oriented films, especially blockbusters, female characters are frequently objectified. Being shaped as princesses to be rescued by male protagonists or obstacles for heroes to overcome,

³ For more information, see *Ta de guang ying : nv dao yan fang tan lu* by Zhou.

a large number of female characters are gazed with a male perspective, feeding male sexual desire. The female characters are not being treated as subjects who have their own rights or feelings, but are more commonly used as narrative tools, sometimes even when a film features female protagonists. The situation is rather different for films made by female directors. In female-led films, possibilities and complexities for female characters tend to be more diverse. They are more often taken as subjects instead of objects, with sufferings and obstacles in their own life.

Certain kinds of stereotypes still exist. In *The Crossing* and *Angels Wear White*, both teenage protagonists have inconsiderate and jobless mothers. Both seem to imply that the mothers' dereliction of maternal duty is part of the reason why their teenage daughters suffer or make mistakes. In *Love Education* and *Dear Ex*, both middle-aged female protagonists are dull and nagging, with no sexual attractiveness. Since the reality and literary works mutually influence each other, it could be tricky to decide whether the similarities between the roles and the homogenization of the roles are reflections of a highly homogenized reality or the filmmakers' stereotyping tendencies. But still, more female characters that break existing stereotypes towards women are needed.

Familial relationships are crucial to the stories. In all films selected, at least one pair of familial relationship (mother-daughter, grandmother-granddaughter, mother-son) serves as an important aspect of the story. Most families are modeled after nuclear families: the divorced families in *The Crossing* and *Angels Wear White*, the combination between a heterosexual woman and a homosexual man in *Dear Ex*, Grandpa's bigamy in *Love Education*, the Chinese American immigrant family in *The Farewell*, and the intercultural

marriage between Hueyin's parents in *Song of the Exile*. The variant elements add more dramatic tension to the films, but they do not influence the important role family plays in the stories. For some of the characters like Nai Nai in *The Farewell* and Nanna in *Love Education*, the characters are even directly named after their positions within a family, instead of having their own names. Most reconciliations that accomplish narrative closure are between family members instead of other kinds of relationships. Further research is still needed to see whether familial elements are significantly more important in female-directed films.

Geographical and socio-economic contexts shape the characters and the stories differently. Peipei, in *The Crossing*, is a teenage girl severely influenced by the inconsistency between her citizenship and living place. Within a postcolonial context, Hueyin faces the same kind of dilemma that Hong Kong faces. Billi, as a Chinese American immigrant, suffers from culture shock but also initiates cultural communication.

The three female protagonists from different age groups in *Love Education* have background settings with different urban levels. With a long and complicated history, Greater China and the Chinese diaspora have offered a variety of geographical contexts, within which different geographical, political, and cultural relations have been formed. These specific contexts exert influence differently, forming various kinds of personalities and temperaments.

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