

A Semiotic Analysis of the Stereotypes Regarding the Physiological Characteristics of Chinese Mothers as Representation in the Magazine "Pavilion of Women"

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Abstract: *This research employs the Hollywood film "Pavilion of Women" as a case study. The primary research subject in the film is the character of Mrs. Wu's mother, with an emphasis on the examination and analysis of the stereotype associated with Mrs. Wu's physical attributes. This research employs a semiotic analysis methodology. In recent years, the portrayal of Chinese women in Hollywood films has emerged as a significant area of research, particularly between 2010 and 2020, during when the volume of studies in this domain peaked, reflecting considerable interest from the academic community. Historically, the Western stereotype of Chinese social culture and the portrayal of women has evolved through several phases: the era of respect (18th century), the era of contempt (1840-1905), the era of benevolence (1905-1937), the era of administration (1937-1944), and the era of disillusionment (1944-1949). Nonetheless, there remains a paucity of research regarding the stereotype of Chinese moms, and the utilization of semiotic analysis in this domain is constrained. This study employs semiotic theory to elucidate how Hollywood films influence perceptions of maternal physiological traits, so establishing a theoretical foundation for future research.*

Keywords: semiotic analysis, stereotypes, physiological characteristics, Chinese mothers

1. Introduction

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, certain researchers began to focus more on humanized content. The research domains mostly encompassed political and cultural spheres. Their perceptions of Chinese social culture predominantly focused on the antagonistic period following 1949. This is primarily due to the significant political, economic, and social transformations China has undergone since 1949. By implementing policies like reform and opening up, it has attained rapid economic growth and stable social development, emerging as one of the countries with significant global influence. This period also marked a shift in the West's perceptions of China. Certain perspectives indicated that the West was concerned and watchful regarding China's advancement, perceiving it as a potential threat or danger. Consequently, to emphasize the theory of China's peril, the film's content depicted certain negative stereotypes of female representations (Cui, 2003).

In recent years, globalization has intensified the connections between nations. Recent portrayals of female characters in Hollywood films set against Chinese cultural backdrops have elicited contentious audience reviews. In the film "Pavilion of Women," Suanni (2024), as a film critic, noted that "the narrative is replete with humorous elements and the details are rife with inconsistencies." The entire play utilizes "life" as its focal focus, although it encompasses metaphors that depict the personal relationship between Asian men and Asian women as unattractive and stifling. The narrative suggests that the Asian community is constrained by feudal ideologies, and Asian women must depend on Western men for their liberation. Only Western men can provide them with genuine happiness and emancipation. Simultaneously, Asian males are denigrated as a "inferior group" deemed "unworthy" of associating with Asian women. The scriptwriter and director appear to be attempting to communicate a racially biased message through these terms (Suanni, April 27, 2024); In the film critique "Give it a Resounding Name", it was noted that "the worldview of this drama is muddled and excessively Orientalist." (Assign it a prominent title, 2017). This article does not include numerous such comments. These remarks indicate that Hollywood's preconceptions of Chinese women persist and continue to elicit criticism from viewers.

In terms of research frequency and quantity, the main sources of literature include international and Chinese databases. From the total retrieved literature, relevant research began to appear in 1900, especially since 1990, the research on the stereotypes of Chinese women in Hollywood movies has shown a rapid growth trend, especially from 2010 to 2020, reaching its peak. This shows that this research has attracted more and more attention from researchers and is a hot topic in today's society. However, existing research mainly focuses on young female roles, while there is less discussion on the stereotypes of Chinese mothers. In addition, most studies use text analysis or cultural research methods, and the application of semiotic analysis is still relatively limited (Hannam, K., & Knox, D., 2005).

Ultimately, from the standpoint of influence and societal reaction, as society grows increasingly attuned to stereotypes, the Chinese narrative "Mulan," enacted by Chinese individuals in recent years, has incited intense controversy and debate both online and offline in China. The Chinese populace rejects American caricatures of Chinese women, resulting in online conflicts and offline demonstrations. Numerous instances exist, prompting numerous researchers to dedicate themselves to this investigation. Currently, it is imperative to mitigate the preconceptions of Chinese women in cinema and to enhance the focus on role diversity and cultural authenticity (White, 2015).

This study utilizes "Pavilion of Women" as a case study, concentrating on the physiological attributes of the maternal character (Mrs. Wu) in the film, and employs semiotic analysis to investigate how Hollywood films construct stereotypes of Chinese mothers through visual elements, symbols, and narratives, while examining the cultural logic and symbolic significance underlying these representations. This study seeks to address deficiencies in current research through a comprehensive literature analysis, offer theoretical frameworks for future film production, and encourage the diverse evolution of female representations in cross-cultural communication.

2. Methodology

This study adopts the interpretative research method, combined with film textual analysis and semiotics analysis, to explore how Hollywood movies shape the stereotype of Chinese women through visual, symbolic, narrative and cultural background. The film text analysis focuses on

the lines, picture composition and character creation of key scenes in "Pavilion of Women" to reveal its stereotyped presentation of the image of Chinese mothers. The semiotic analysis is based on Peirce's (1931) semiotics theory and analyzes from three levels: icon, index and symbol (Kilstrup, 2015). Through this analytical framework, this study systematically examines how film texts use visual symbols to construct stereotypes of Chinese mothers, and further interprets its cultural background and cross-cultural influence.

3. Data Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Summary of the Pavilion of Women (2001)



Figure 1: Poster for the *Pavilion of Women* film and screenshot of Mrs Wu in the film
Photo source: [Pavilion of Women - Wikipedia](#)

Figure 1 displays the poster for the film *Pavilion of Women* alongside a screenshot of Ms. Wu from the movie. *Pavilion of Women* is a film encompassing themes of love, conflict, and adventure, directed by Yan Hao, set in China. The screenwriters consist of Paul Collins, Pearl S. Buck, and Luo Yan. The principal actors in the film are Willem Dafoe, Luo Yan, and Shi Xiu. This film is a Hollywood production co-produced by China and the United States, primarily by China Film Co., Ltd. and Universal Pictures. The primary languages of the film are English and Mandarin Chinese. It premiered in the United States on May 4, 2001, with a duration of 116 minutes (Istighfaroh, 2006).

The film *Pavilion of Women* is based on the novel "The Pavilion of Flowers" by Pearl S. Buck, an American author, human rights and women's rights advocate, and Nobel laureate in literature. Pearl S. Buck, the novelist, is an American woman who resided in China for about 40 years and is fluent in Chinese as her native tongue. She is profoundly affected by Chinese culture, with her works concentrating on traditional Chinese families and women, alongside societal transformations in China. In this novel, Pearl Buck depicts a cohort of intellectual, beautiful, and independent Chinese women via narratives of marriage, childbirth, and spiritual endeavors within the mansions of the Republic of China. To resolve the contradiction between Chinese and Western cultures.

The film is set during the Second World War in 1938. During that period, the military conflict between China and Japan was critical, and China encountered significant trials and obstacles in military, political, economic, and social domains. The drama depicts the intense warfare occurring between the Central and North China provinces during that period. Despite the impact on the Jiangnan water town, the situation remained rather tranquil. The narrative of the film unfolds within the Wu family estate located in the Jiangnan water town. The emotional and cultural conflicts within the Wu family, centered on Mrs. Wu's daughter-in-law, profoundly illustrate her experience in a traditional household. The juxtaposition between Mrs. Wu's daughter-in-law and the traditional, conservative Mrs. Wu underscores the gradual emergence of the daughter-in-law's independent consciousness and her journey towards self-actualization.

The film *Pavilion of Women* is centered on the experiences of Wu Ailian, Mrs. Wu's daughter-in-law, illustrating the complex emotional dynamics within a traditional extended family in the Jiangnan water town region of China. In the film, Mrs. Wu's daughter-in-law is a woman who commenced her journey towards independent thought and self-actualization at the age of 40. Mrs. Wu adheres rigorously to Chinese traditions and familial hierarchy. Despite the coexistence of tradition and innovation in Chinese thought during that period, Mrs. Wu remained steadfast in her adherence to antiquated norms and resisted novel concepts. Consequently, in the drama, Mrs. Wu embodies her daughter-in-law's refusal to defy convention and seek own values. This illustrates the underlying conflict between Mrs. Wu's daughter-in-law and Mrs. Wu, as well as the manifestation of cognitive dissonance in cross-cultural communication between China and the West (Lu, S. H., & Mi, J.009).

Mrs. Wu holds considerable importance and relevance in the picture. Primarily, she is the principal advocate of the central narrative thread. Her distinctive approach and emotional transformations not only propel the film's development but also serve as a pivotal turning point in the narrative. Secondly, as a symbolic embodiment of the film's theme, she epitomizes the archetype of traditional Chinese ladies. Her dominant role within the family and her intricate inner psyche contribute significant emotional tension to the picture. Simultaneously, her conflict between familial obligations and personal feelings not only illustrates the profundity of traditional family ethics but also harmonizes the narrative tempo, augmenting the emotional resonance and cultural significance of the picture.

Consequently, Mrs. Wu was selected for analysis since she represents the archetype of Chinese women (motherhood) in the film *Pavilion of Women*, serving as a mother-in-law and a central character within the family. She serves as both the manager of familial matters and the emotional stabilizer and figure of authority inside the household. Her conduct and emotional transformations not only advance the primary plot but also illustrate the multifaceted nature of the classic mother archetype, highlighting the tension and synthesis between conventional familial ideals and contemporary individual autonomy. Mrs. Wu's representation is profoundly culturally significant. Her expressions and actions embody the societal expectations and conceptions of the maternal role in Chinese culture, serving as a significant example for examining the stereotypes associated with Chinese women.

3.2 Analysis of icon, index and symbol in Scene



Figure 2: Mrs. Wu was furious because her son broke the family rules and led the family to reflect

At 01:28:05-01:28:49 in the film, Old Madam Wu (Mr. Wu's mother and Mrs. Wu's mother-in-law) makes an appearance. Old Madam Wu's son violates the family regulations. Old Madam Wu guides her son and the entire family in having Mr. Wu recite the family norms and contemplate his errors before the ancestral tablet. Old Madam Wu ultimately succumbed to her fury over this tragedy.

Figure 2 illustrates a screenshot of the scene on the left and the facial features of Old Madam Wu on the right. The image depicts Old Madam Wu with a round, fat visage, lax dark skin, and pronounced wrinkles. She possesses a tidy haircut and adorns it with a traditional hair accessory known as a "headband". This allows us to derive the direct stereotype of Old Madam Wu as possessing a round, full face, embodying age, tradition, and dignity.

Psychology, society, culture, and other disciplines enable a thorough analysis of the causes and mechanisms underlying the formation of stereotypes. According to John Bowlby's attachment theory, the emotional characteristics of psychology indicate that the initial attachment between mothers and children fosters a sense of security, which is crucial for individuals' subsequent growth. Psychologist Leslie Zebrowitz's "baby face hypothesis" posits that a round face is more likely to evoke the look of an infant (Holmes, 2014). Consequently, roundness may be linked to warmth, connection, and safety. In the performance, Mrs. Wu's face is depicted with a round shape to convey the warmth and affection of Chinese moms, allowing the family members to feel more at ease and secure. In this scenario, Mrs. Wu's countenance is grave, indicating her emotional stability in managing familial matters, as well as her substantial authority and control. Mrs. Wu serves as both a source of love and stability inside the family and a custodian of familial norms and traditional culture (Parsons, 2017).

Talcott Parsons' Structural Functionalism Theory emphasizes that, from a social standpoint, the necessity of function is crucial for maintaining social stability and order, with each individual fulfilling a distinct role that serves a specific purpose within society. Senior individuals are typically linked to the dissemination of wisdom and experience. The sagging and wrinkles on Mrs. Wu's face in the performance indicate her advanced age. In the play, Mrs. Wu is depicted as a sagacious, seasoned, and steadfast leader within both the family and the community.



Figure 3: Mrs. Wu wearing a headband and display of headband styles



Figure 4: (a) Sculpture of a male warrior wearing a "headband" unearthed from the Qin and Han Dynasties; (b) "Ceremony Guards Traveling" unearthed from the tomb of Prince Zhang Huai; (c) "Empress of Song Renzong" Anonymous, Song Dynasty, color on silk, 172X165.3cm, collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei; (d) "Empress of Yuan Shizu" Anonymous, Yuan Dynasty, color on silk, collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei; (e) Leng Mei "Character" Silk hanging scroll

We examine the "headband" donned by Mrs. Wu from a cultural standpoint, as depicted in Figure 3. The headband is a conventional head adornment in ancient China. It is constructed by folding or cutting fabric or brocade into strips and encircling them around the forehead. It is frequently adorned with needlework or pearls. The origin of this headdress can be traced back to the Shang and Zhou dynasties, but the term "headband" began in the Tang Dynasty and became more popular in the Ming and Qing dynasties. As stated in "Notes on Ancient and Modern China," during the Qin and Han dynasties, the headband was solely employed by military generals and warriors to enhance military administration. Various forces donned distinct colors of headbands, as illustrated in Figure 4 (a); the headband during the Tang Dynasty served two primary functions. The initial one was still derived from the warriors of the Qin and Han dynasties. The use of a headband conferred an appearance of bravery and strength, as illustrated in Figure 4 (b) "The Traveling Picture of the Guards," discovered in the tomb of Prince Zhang Huai. The second point is that ladies donning headbands while attired in masculine clothing progressively emerged as a fashionable trend. During the Song Dynasty, headbands increasingly resembled women's jewelry and gained popularity among women. Figure 4 (c) Song Dynasty "Portrait of the Empress of Song Renzong"; A hierarchy of headbands progressively developed during the Yuan Dynasty. Initially, certain noblewomen donned them to augment their beauty and adorn themselves, as illustrated in Figure 4 (d) "Portrait of the Empress of Yuan Shizu". This aesthetic practice progressively disseminated to typical households. Among the general populace, women donned headbands primarily to secure their hair for labor and secondarily for ornamental purposes. Headbands gained increasing popularity during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. At that time, irrespective of gender, age, status, or position as master or servant, individuals might adorn their foreheads with this

jewelry. Concurrently, headbands increased in cost and progressively became a mark of affluence. Variations in color, design, material, and skill resulted in distinct classes of headbands, as illustrated in Figure 4 (e) "Characters" silk hanging scroll. The headband has transitioned from a men's exclusive accessory to a women's adornment, from a warrior's attire to a unisex item for all ages, and from a commonplace garment to a symbol of affluence.

Ancient Chinese texts, like *The Book of Rites* and *Dreams of the Southern Song Dynasty*, together with pertinent historical documents, indicate that women prioritize attire and headpiece during significant festivals, with the headband being a notable accessory. Consequently, ladies with headbands are perceived as ceremonial, dignified, and respectable, embodying the acknowledgment and adherence to traditional norms. In this scene, no women wear this type of hair accessory except for Mrs. Wu, who continues to don it. This indicates that, with the progression of time, the significance and function of this accessory have evolved, yet Mrs. Wu remains committed to tradition, exemplifying her steadfastness and dignity (Davis, 2001).

In this scene, all the women have abandoned this type of hair accessory, with only Granny Wu still donning it. This indicates that, with the progression of time, the role and significance of this ornament have evolved. However, Granny Wu's adherence to tradition positions her as the final bastion of traditional culture. It further perpetuates the stereotype of her as obstinately adhering to antiquated traditions and resisting contemporary change. This illustrates the Western misinterpretation of Confucian Chinese culture, which focuses solely on the 'conservatism and suppression' inherent in Confucianism, disregarding the genuine influence of women inside the family while appealing to the conventional perceptions of Western viewers regarding Chinese culture.

The facial characteristics of Granny Wu are as follows: **Connotative Significance** In Hollywood films, Chinese women are frequently shown as the custodians and transmitters of traditional culture. Consequently, Chinese elderly women are depicted as vestiges of the antiquated world, symbolising a feudal, traditional, and subjugated culture, thereby establishing a binary contrast between Western advancement and Chinese retrogression. This story not only underscores the preeminence of Western culture but also perpetuates preconceptions about Chinese women, particularly older mothers, who are entrenched in conventional, conservative positions.



Figure 5: Wu Laotai's hands

Figure 5 illustrates the religious beliefs of Granny Wu as reflected in her demographic data. Granny Wu's skin condition indicates her advanced age and categorises her as elderly. Furthermore, the Han Chinese attire adorned with characteristic flower motifs indicates her affiliation with the Han Chinese ethnicity. Granny Wu has a household filled with children and grandkids, signifying her primary role as a maternal figure and her centrality within the family system. The detail of her holding a rosary and the lamp-lighting ritual, planned by her family for her afterlife, suggests that Wu Laoye and her relatives adhered to Buddhism. Therefore, the above visual images and changes in scenes stereotype the religious beliefs of elderly motherhood. Simultaneously, her outfit indicates that she is traditional and conservative. The depiction of the aforementioned image aligns with the intrinsic perceptions that Western viewers possess towards Chinese mothers

In a social context, the belief in Buddhism in China is not innate, but the result of an individual or family's choice at a particular stage of life or in a particular environment. From a social class perspective, women choose to believe in Buddhism early in adulthood, usually to adapt to the stage of gradually entering society and facing various challenges and choices. Buddhist doctrines and practices offer spiritual sustenance, emotional solace, and guidance for existence. During middle age, women experience their children's maturation and the subsequent empty nest phase, sometimes leading to feelings of spiritual void and isolation. Buddhism can assist individuals in attaining inner tranquility and equilibrium. In their older years, women's adherence to Buddhism focused on merit accumulation and the pursuit of inner stability and liberation, directly linked to their life stages. Furthermore, embracing Buddhism may serve as a strategy to navigate challenging periods during significant events or adverse circumstances. However, this portrayal reflects a misunderstanding of Chinese culture and ignores reality. In this scene of the film, the image of the mother is portrayed as a traditional Buddhist believer through the rosary, the exorcism ritual, and the clothing. It adopts the Western media's consumption of exoticism, not to show an authentic portrayal of the Chinese mother, but to symbolise her image by using religious symbols to make it more in line with Western audiences' imagination of China.

The connotative meaning of the characterisation of Granny Wu's religious belief in Buddhism in her demographic profile is that Granny Wu wants to explore the meaning of life through Buddhism in order to achieve self-transcendence and spiritual liberation, further accumulate life experience, improve personal cultivation, and in this way better guide and educate future generations. However, the film uses religious symbolism to connect Western audiences' preconceived notions of the "mysterious East" with the image of the Chinese mother, portraying her as a representative of "tradition, religion and family responsibility". This stereotype further reinforces the Chinese mother's adherence to and defence of traditional values. This stereotype not only exacerbates the distortion of the image of the Chinese mother, but also maintains her passive, symbolic position in cross-cultural stories.

4. Conclusion

This study examines the stereotypes of Chinese mothers' physical and anthropomorphic traits in the Hollywood film "Women's Attic." Hollywood films often misrepresent Chinese culture in the West, perpetuating stereotypes of Chinese moms and portraying Chinese women as feudal, traditional, and conservative, so reinforcing the perceived superiority of Western civilisation.

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