

An Exploration of Mother-daughter Painful Relationship in Feminist Cinema with Patriarchal Structures: A Case Study of Spring Tide

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Abstract: This article focuses on the mother-daughter painful relationship in Chinese feminist cinema, taking *Spring Tide* as an example, to explore the formation, manifestation and impact of this relationship in the context of the patriarchal structure. The film focuses on a three-generation story of mother-daughter relationships between an unmarried mother, Guo Jianbo, with her illegitimate daughter, Guo Wanting, and her single mother, Ji Minglan. As a female-centred film, the stereotypical image of mother and daughter is transformed in *Spring Tide*. In the ambivalence of the mother's love and hatred for her daughter, and the daughter's affection and rivalry for her mother, this film reveals the unique psychological structure and mode of relationship between females. Based on Lacan's "mirror stage" theory, this article highlights the function and plight of the mirroring between mother and daughter in the process of self-identification. In the patriarchal regime, the lack of female discourse leads the daughter to construct her ideal-ego in the mirror image of her mother but the alienated image in the mirror constrains the daughter's self-consciousness, which forms a complex relationship. It not only reflects the female-dominated diversified female relationship, but also implies the subjectivity plight of females in the patriarchal society. With the analysis of *Spring Tide*, this article discloses the profound significance of the mother-daughter painful relationship in feminist cinema which provides a new perspective for understanding the subjectivity of female discourse and suggests considerations for addressing the mother-daughter tension in future research.

Keywords: Feminist Cinema, Mother-daughter Relationship, Mirror Stage, Spring Tide

1. Introduction

With the development of feminism in China, Chinese feminist films are no longer only focused on sisterhood and strong female transformation as a typical core narrative but the development has been directed towards a more diverse range of topics with a gradual inquiry of realistic dimensions leading to the exploration of more innovative and critical argument about feminism. The mother-daughter relationship aligns with the diversified demands of current feminist films. In addition, with the prevailing independent female ideology in China, women would be keener to focus on other women around them instead of binary gender issues relating to the masculine, allowing rethinking with the

initiative of the subconscious behavioural motives behind establishing women relationships. Therefore, despite the fact that the mother-daughter relationship as a feminist agenda is not as well-known as marriage, independence and freedom, it is possible to discern that the exploration of the mother-daughter relationship is a new trend in the Chinese feminist context and a new force to promote the perfection of feminist theories given that mothers and daughters as the same gender have a particular mechanism of power entangled in the umbilical cord. Naturally and reasonably, as an expression of feminism ideology, feminist films expand their vision to focus on mother-daughter relationships. For instance, *Song of Spring* (2022), *Hi, Mom* (2021), *All About My Mother* (2021), *Girls Always Happy* (2019), *A Dog Barking at the Moon* (2019) and *Spring Tide* (2019). Especially, the director of *Song of Spring* (2022) and *Spring Tide* (2019), Lina Yang, focuses on mother-daughter relationships within an unavoidable context of “auteur theory” [1]. *Spring Tide* (2019) is a profound and concrete portrayal of Chinese-specific realistic issues between mother and daughter as a feminist film covering two kinds of mother-daughter relationships in three generations. Taking *Spring Tide* as a case study and Lacan's Mirror Stage as a theoretical framework, therefore, this article analyses and explores the pain in mother-daughter relationships from the three aspects of causes, expressions and impacts to address the gaps in the exploration of mother-daughter relationships in Chinese feminist films at present.

2. Mother-daughter Mirror Image

2.1. Lacan's Mirror Stage and the Mother-daughter Relationships

Lacan initially proposed in his “mirror stage” theory that an infant's primordial recognition of oneself as “I” occurs between 6 and 18 months of age [2]. Before autonomously attaining control over their bodily movements, toddlers have been able to recognise their reflection exists in a mirror as a coherent, independent and whole image, which consequently leads to their jubilation and self-obsessed. The infant's positive reaction to the image in the mirror is the basic paradigm of the primitive Ego's origins. In reality, the mother's reaction is “the other in the mirror” for infants. The subject engages in a process of self-construction that involves reverse imagination, mis-recognition and alienation based on the mother's selective response to one's own behaviour. Namely, the mother's selective response strengthens certain behaviours from the infant which promotes the infant's ego identification. The intersubjective phantasm framework established in the mirror stage makes the child a reflection of the mother's desires and an image she prefers to please the mother who formed a mirror relationship with this infant. The ego with which the infant identifies at this stage is an imaginary reflection of the mirror, which is external to the subject and objectified as a mirroring image. However, the child's constantly reinforcing identification with the mother results in the child recognising from the mother's intermittent absence from reality that there are other objects of desire for the mother. Anna Freud described this identification as one of the behavioural patterns the ego deals with external objects which arouse anxiety [3]. Confronted with the overwhelming superior authority of the parent, the primitive ego transforms the self from the threatened to the threat-creating by imitating the aggressor as best possible. Applying Lacan's theory of the mirror stage to the relationship between mother and daughter, as the two sides of the “mother-daughter mirror”, the mother and the daughter form a kind of mutual confrontation and interdependence binding relationship. The daughter, as a subject facing the mirror image of her mother as the “other”, has both a misrecognition of the inverse imagination and an irresistible attraction to her mother. Lacan et al. have evolved the theory by arguing that the mirror stage is no longer a phase in the infant's growth, but illustrates a permanent framework of subjectivity, or as the paradigm of “imaginary order”, which suggests that subjectivity constantly expands the ego in multiple superimpositions of mis-recognition of the mirror image of the “other” [4].

2.2. Empathy in Resistance

Although *Spring Tide* is set in a large, woman-centred family that lacks a clear image of masculinity, few scenes in the film positively express the warmth of motherly love between the women, especially between Guo Jianbo and Ji Minglan. The relationship between the two appears to be one of female rivalry between possession and escape. In fact, delving deeply into the subject dimension of the two suggests that the relationship between Ji Minglan and Guo Jianbo is akin to looking into a mirror, forming a reflection but the image is in reverse order. In the bus scene, Guo Jianbo offers her seat to a mother with a baby in arms and warmly glances at the mother and child. At this stage, the audience has yet to establish a clear profile of Guo Jianbo and might not consider this action excessively, but might attribute it to Guo's own moral integrity with regard to her journalist status. Nevertheless, with the appearance of Ji Minglan - who features aggressive and dominant language - it stands to reason that this behaviour is a projection of Guo Jianbo's subconscious desire for her mother's love in the face of her mother [5]. It is the ideal-ego, the ideal of perfection that the ego strives to emulate, imagined by Guo Jianbo in the process of self-construction when she confronts her excessively dominating mother who focuses her attention on judging Guo's father. Guo Jianbo's confrontational attitude towards her mother, Ji Minglan, seems to have imagined a "mirror image of the Other" in the process of self-construction that is in complete opposition to her mother's expectations. Nevertheless, Guo Jianbo's behaviour of angrily slapping the male teacher who sexually abuses his students indicates that subconsciously Guo Jianbo has identified herself with her "mother's mirror image" under the strengthening of her mother's constant selective response, allowing Guo Jianbo to fully empathise with the pain that her father, who has a penchant for assaulting women, inflicts on her mother, when facing the sexual delinquency male teacher. Zhang argues that this is a kind of plot intertextualisation, suggesting that the ambiguous father figure in the film is fragmented for Guo Jianbo due to the fact that the subject is confronted with the mirror image as the Other, which is both a reverse mis-recognition and an irresistible attraction [6]. In the quarrels caused by Guo's father's topic, facing the real mother in front of her eyes and the fictitious father from her mother's words, the tremendous sense of disintegration makes Guo Jianbo begin to become fragmented and disorganized. While Ji Minglan, facing her daughter, also struggles to repress her sexual desire amongst the insanely uncontrollable accusations and begins to become hysterical. When Ji Minglan and Guo Jianbo are in one room, their gaze at each other can be perceived as an imaginary's fantasy construction, which corresponds to Lacan's statement in the mirror stage that seeing oneself image establishes a discord between the idealising image in the mirror and the chaotic reality of self. Consequently, every dialogue between the two ends in a confrontation of mutual accusations because of the huge gap in their attitudes towards Guo's father.

3. Motherhood Fear

3.1. Co-existence of Attraction and Rivalry

The fragmented images mirrored by mothers and daughters are the origin of the tension in the mother-daughter relationship. As the first mirroring image of the daughter, the mother has an important influence on the daughter's identification. While the mother fails to recognise her female identity, the daughter also suffers from a self-identification dilemma reflected in her mother's mirroring image. The daughter seeks to trace an image from her mother, one that is both similar to and different from her mother. The mother, because of her sense of fragmentation and incompleteness, is unable to provide her daughter with a solid and complete mirroring reference, nor is she able to play the role of a reliable "other" in her daughter's imaginary. Both mother and daughter resemble infants who lack a sense of independent ego in their relationship, and they live in a chaotic status where they are not

distinguishable from each other, resulting in a love-hate ambivalence between mother and daughter. Therefore, it is a fragmented ego that the daughter initially glimpses and mis-recognises under the mirroring of the absent maternal love, which prevents the daughter from gaining a holistic ego in the imaginary realm. Wu further applies Lacan's mirror theory to analyse the reasons for mother-daughter tension [7]. She argues that the imaginary identification of the self with the image of others simultaneously introduces a structure of love and rivalry. Once the structure of love is cracked, the intensity of love will be transformed into the force of aggression. Put simply, the subject is often alienated by mis-recognition leading to a tendency towards aggression in imaginary relationships with others, which manifests in the mother-daughter relationship as the co-existence of attraction and rivalry. When the narcissism of the mother and daughter in the mirroring relationship is not satisfied, this attraction then turns into aggressive rivalry.

3.2. Symbiotic Relationship as A Foundation of Fear

3.2.1. Relationship between Guo Jianbo and Ji Minglan

Guo Jianbo is a woman who desires her mother's love but resists her mother. Her fragmented ego is constructed through interactions with her mother in the early stages of her life where self-alienation begins. While the mother is supposed to be the ideal paragon of female gender identity, Guo Jianbo fails to have a complete figure of reference to guide her growth healthily. She is eager for the embrace from her mother, but instead, she is cursed by her mother, who treats her the same as her father, so this irreconcilable tension foreshadows the internal fragmentation of the subject. As a mother, Ji Minglan's subject-construction process is affected by certain historical backgrounds and her husband, thus she fails to overcome the impact that mis-recognition plays a role in anxiety, which indicates that she can neither construct a complete and independent ego nor provide Guo Jianbo with a satisfactory female image to reflect. Only with Guo Jianbo can Ji Minglan achieve the pleasure of absolute superiority as a man over a woman in a patriarchal context. Hence, she takes on the role of a potent domination of her daughter and categorises her daughter as a defective substitute who lacks integrity of ego. Beauvoir states that the tension in the mother-daughter relationship that increases with her daughter's growing age is due to the mother's jealousy of her daughter's infinite opportunities to become a real woman in comparison to her aged body and conventional destiny [8]. When confronted with Guo Jianbo, who is becoming independent, Ji Minglan can neither accept the daughter's behaviour of trying to escape from her nor allow her substitute to construct the self so as to gain subjectivity and become the other. Based on the above, the co-existence of attraction and rivalry presented by Guo Jianbo and Ji Minglan in the film epitomises the painful symbiotic relationship between mother and daughter.

3.2.2. Relationship between Guo Jianbo and Guo Wanting

The painful symbiotic relationship is not only present between Ji Minglan and Guo Jianbo, but also between Guo Jianbo and Guo Wanting. For instance, the film depicts Guo Wanting and Guo Jianbo burying an Avalokiteshvara statue in a flowerpot together, and lying on the bed in Guo Jianbo's dormitory discussing sexual organs explicitly. Superficially, the mother-daughter relationship between the two does not contain an unbreakable hierarchy of authority but rather a sisterhood interaction between equals. It is an embodiment of the symbiotic relationship of mutual attraction between mother and daughter. Nevertheless, the mother-daughter relationship between Guo Wanting and Guo Jianbo is accompanied by inexpressible pain due to the replacement of the mother's role by her maternal grandmother and the utter absence of a father figure altogether.

When the two go to the zoo together apart from the background of Ji Minglan, Guo Wanting repeatedly asks Guo Jianbo why she, as a mother, did not show up when her daughter was an infant.

Guo Wanting implacably expresses intense confusion about her mother's absence during her childhood. According to the Lacanian mirror stage, in the early stages of a daughter's maturity, she perceives her mother's image and reaction as her first mirroring reflection and considers her mother to be the embodiment of humankind [9]. For Guo Wanting, the prolonged absence of her mother leads her to stare into an empty mirror, in which she can neither see her imaginary self nor her mother's reflection. The replacement of her mother's role with that of her maternal grandmother merely enhances Guo Wanting's disorder and confusion in the process of accomplishing self-identification. Therefore, Guo Wanting and Guo Jianbo develop a mirror relationship of mother and daughter with a gaze at each other without the intervention of the grandmother, which for Guo Wanting is a process of re-construction of her established fragments of ego according to the belated mirror image of her mother. Guo Wanting constructs an imaginary integrity in the process, thus gaining narcissistic satisfaction from her inspection of the self. However, it occurs through the gaze on her mother that Guo Wanting realises that her mother's desire for sex leads to her mother's intermittent absence. Therefore, the loss of her mother, the loss of this illusionary mirroring of her integrated self terrifies Guo Wanting. When Guo Wanting is left alone in bed, she sits in the shadows facing Guo Jianbo, who returns home late because of having sex with a man, howling and confronting her natural mother about her lack of duty. At this point, the fear that the daughter feels in facing her mother is based on the painful symbiotic relationship between the two, which indicates that the daughter cannot help but love her mother, nor can she accept that her mother does not love her.

3.3. Denial of Motherhood

According to Lacan, the so-called "female" in the symbolic world is only a figment of male, which is a cultural symbol that is left to be defined by the male and constructs an object image of male subjectivity [10]. In the symbolic order, female discourse is lacking, which means the female can only restate the male discourse structure. Thus, to be a mother in a patriarchal society implies that individual subjectivity is proactively "exploited" in the name of devotion. When mothers are eager to break free from the bonds of motherhood but fail to achieve a solution, "hysteria" will be a common occurrence [11]. This is an intense expression from a dominant mother who is influenced by the context of patriarchal society about female subjectivity issues, which is that the female fails to accomplish gender identification in the male mirroring, especially in a certain absent or weakened father figure situation in the family. During the process of growing up, daughters suture into the role of motherhood regarded as adult females' social identity and accomplish their imaginary identification in the context of close contact with their mothers. The symbiotic relationship with their mothers allows daughters to witness the pain of "being a mother" in the mother-daughter mirror image, which leads to daughters' fear of "motherhood" as a social identity.

In the *Spring Tide*, Ji Minglan raises Guo Wanting while Guo Jianbo does not resist but intervenes, which forms a loop of fear of motherhood in terms of women. In order to prevent her daughter, Guo Jianbo, from repeating her mistake of being a mother, Ji Minglan proactively assumes the responsibility of raising her granddaughter, Guo Wanting. By doing so, Guo Jianbo remains a daughter identity who "stays in mother's realm" in Ji Minglan's consciousness [12]. The fact that Guo Jianbo considers abortion first when she realises that she is pregnant with Guo Wanting shows that Guo subconsciously resists motherhood, thus she does not resist Ji Minglan's behaviour in raising Guo Wanting. Moreover, Guo Jianbo consistently strays from the margin of Guo Wanting's upbringing with the centred target of realisation of self, such as working instead of attending parent-teacher conferences and ignoring her daughter for the sake of dating a man. Nevertheless, the fact that Guo Jianbo intervenes in time when she notices that Ji Minglan is educating Guo Wanting on the ideology of "good womanhood" suggests that Guo Jianbo is fearful of the possibility that Guo Wanting might accomplish the "motherhood" identification in the future under the discipline of the

patriarchal society as well. The two mother-daughter relationships built by these three generations form a loop that closes without exit and never stops as well as the spring tides repeat in cycles with the seasons going back and forth.

4. Disturbing to the Mother

4.1. Opposition with Mother

Although the male figure in the film is ambiguous or even absent, the source of the mother-daughter relationship between Guo Jianbo and Ji Minglan, which is coloured by pain and mutual hurt, is the long-dead father of Guo, who is only mentioned in a few words in the dialogue. Despite the death of her husband, the mother, Ji Minglan, is still profoundly affected by him. The fact that Ji Minglan calls both her husband and daughter “your Guo’s family” implies that she does not regard herself as a part of the family even as a victim of that. The absence of a father highlights the deep-rooted influence of patriarchal ideology on the mother as well as the fact that invisible patriarchal authority is the main factor leading to the estrangement between mother and daughter. While Ji Minglan is permanently trapped by her role as wife and mother, Guo Jianbo, in her mother's rejection of her, is also in a predicament of self-alienation all the time. Guo Wanting is never able to occupy her mother completely on account of her mother's intermittent absence, therefore it is impossible to integrate and unify the ideal ego from the mirror relationship with her mother. Consequently, amidst holding these contradictory each other's gazes, the daughters try to construct their egos as mirror images of the Other who is the definitely opposite of their mothers to accuse their mothers' behaviours, so as to achieve their imagined subjectivities. The daughters are unable to access bodily autonomy entirely through the mirror relationship in the face of their mothers as the dominant positions, thus daughters resort to self-destructive behaviours contrary to their mothers' expectations to demonstrate possession of their bodily subjectivities for the purpose of punishing their mothers.

4.2. Self-destructive Behaviours

In the film, the impossibility of the compulsively obtainable nature of motherly love leads Guo Jianbo to provoke Ji Minglan to gain the mother's attention, and even to antagonise her mother's rejection of her desires in a self-destructive manner. For example, Guo Jianbo admits that she flirts with different men intentionally as a countermeasure to Ji Minglan's expectation for her to find a decent man to start a family. Likewise, Ryomi Suzuki analyses in her book that she entered the industry of filming pornographic AV videos as an actress inextricably associated with her mother's imposing expectations [12].

Contrary to Guo Jianbo's externalised aggressive emotions when confronted by Ji Minglan, Guo Wanting resists her mother's dissatisfaction with an age-inverted sense of maturity. Guo Jianbo, as a daughter who has not received the ideal maternal love and at the same time has a fragmented sense of paternal love, projects her desire for her daughter. In other words, she expects her daughter to have an integrated personality. There is however a distinctly adult tone to Guo Wanting's discourse in the film, for example, Guo Wanting interrogates Ji Minglan in a didactic tone about why she accuses her husband and why she disobeys the patriarchal social discipline of being a good wife and mother. Guo Wanting also presents the didactic tone of a middle-aged adult when speaking to her peer friends to explain to them social behaviours that are incomprehensible to a child. In particular, whenever a quarrel bursts out between Guo Jianbo and Ji Minglan, Guo Wanting skilfully plays the role of mediator, interceding between her grandmother and her mother. The process of Guo Wanting convincing both parties presents a sense of worldliness and sophistication that is extremely inappropriate for her age. This age-inverted indication reveals that Guo Wanting is also fragmented when facing Guo Jianbo's mirroring image as a mother, which undermines the integrity of the

personality that Guo Jianbo expects from her daughter. Guo Jianbo deliberately establishes an atmosphere of equal communication with Guo Xiaoting across the mother-daughter hierarchy in an attempt to destroy the family hierarchy of authority that traps her with this equal discourse, which helps Guo Wanting to accomplish a relatively integrated self-identification process. Nevertheless, since the absence of a father figure and the pursuit attitude towards sex presented by her mother cause Guo Wanting in facing Guo Jianbo to be the same as Guo Jianbo in facing Ji Minglan. The two mirror-like mother-daughter relationships both do not allow the daughter to identify with the subject and the ego consistently. In addition, given the intermittent absence of her mother due to her excessive pursuit of sex in reality, Guo Wanting's attitude towards Guo Jianbo is constantly in a state of fear of loss and gain. Due to the deficiency of bodily autonomy in the mirror stage, Guo Wanting also has an irreconcilable division between her ideal-ego and reality, which leads to a failure to accomplish her identification and gain subjectivity. In her behaviour, Guo Wanting attempts to punish her mother by negating her mother's expectations to gain her mother's attention to complete the narcissistic satisfaction of the imaginary ideal-ego.

5. Impact

With the ongoing development of feminist cinema, Chinese female-centred films have begun to break away from the limitations of male-female gender dualism, sisterhood, and stereotyped female portraits, which means that the attention has been paid more to the real state of different individual females and the diversified relationships among them. As a feminist issue that involves both of the above aspects, the mother-daughter mirroring relationship has become a newly emerging theme in feminist cinema. The nature of the mother-daughter relationship is that of two women who mutually support and influence each other. Within the context of patriarchal structures, the female, as a non-subjective object figure, merely restates the patriarchal discourse. Therefore, the painful relationship between mother and daughter, characterised by mutual attraction and rivalry, is inextricably linked to masculinity, regardless of the presence or absence of a specific male figure. To some extent, this consolidates hegemonic discourses and reinforces social practices that perpetuate the objectifying construction of femininity [13]. *Spring Tide* takes the development of the mother-daughter mirroring relationship as the narrative strategy of feminist cinema. By demonstrating the power segmentation and spiritual alienation of females in the gender-imbalanced family and the plight of the matriarchal family in a patriarchal society, *Spring Tide* develops a new paradigm of expression to undermine the aforementioned stereotypical construction of the female as well as to diminish the hegemony of the patriarchal discourse to facilitate the process of female empowerment.

As females construct the self-subject, they imaginatively project themselves in the reflection of their mothers. This projection constrains the self-consciousness of the daughters in the form of alienation and misrecognition, forming a complicated and painful relationship with their mothers. The characters portrayed in feminist films that focus on the mother-daughter relationship are not stereotyped female victims but both mothers and daughters diversely and individually reflect the pain and struggle accompanied by the awakening of female self-consciousness within the patriarchal structure in a mirroring relationship. *Spring Tide* breaks out of the female mirroring plight through the expression of the mother-daughter pain relationship, which further strengthens the subjective power of female discourse by the counter-viewed, antagonistic Other constituted by the power segmentation among females in the patriarchal structure.

In addition, *Spring Tide*, as a feminist film, has another connotation in that it adopts surrealist techniques to complete the reconciliation with the influence exerted by the father Guo as a representative of the male social identity on the matriarchal family [14]. Moreover, the portrayal of the tension and reconciliation between mother and daughter demonstrates the process that how a woman seeks self-salvation and growth against tough odds. This profound insight into the inner world

of females renders *Spring Tide* a film with strong feminist connotations. It not only deepens the understanding of the origins of the mother-daughter painful relationship but also offers the possibility of bridging the gap between mother and daughter.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to examine the relationship between mother and daughter in the context of the patriarchal structure, which takes the Chinese feminist film *Spring Tide* as the analysis text. Supported by the Lacanian theory of mirror stage, this article places the exploration of mother-daughter relationship in the individual cases of Ji Minglan, Guo Jianbo, and Guo Wanting, addressing the painful relationship between mothers and daughters formed in the patriarchal structure with the combination of theory and practical examples, which reveals that, due to the lack of female discourses, females who urge to accomplish self-identification take their mothers as the mirroring image to develop the ideal-ego for imaginative construction. In this mirroring staring, the reflections of mothers in the mirror constrain the daughters' self-consciousness in an alienating and mis-recognising way, which builds a painful relationship with both attraction and rivalry between them. The plight of female subjectivity in the matrilineal family within a patriarchal society has led to the daughter's complicated emotions of empathy and fear towards her mother, resulting in a fragmented state in which the daughter loves her mother as an individual, but fears being a mother as a social identity. In this disordered fragmentation, the daughter, for the sake of identification, constructs her ego by taking the Other as a mirror image as opposed to her mother, which manifests as the daughter's self-destruction for the purpose of punishing her mother. These findings have significant implications for the reflection of the plight of the other that existed in feminist films and consideration of the subjectivity of female discourse. Based on the *Spring Tide*, the expression of the mother-daughter painful relationship has broken through the female mirroring plight and the conventional stereotypical construction of females, while weakening the hegemony of the male discourse and further reinforcing the subjectivity of the female discourse through the counter-viewed and antagonistic the other constituted by females' segmentation of power in the patriarchal structure, thus facilitating the process of empowerment of females. This study not only provides a deeper understanding of the origins of the mother-daughter painful relationship, but also offers considerations for bridging mother-daughter tensions in future research.

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