

# How Does the Film *Raise the Red Lantern* Explore the Oppression of Women by the Patriarchal Society in China

Yuekun Cui

University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

With the gradual improvement of Chinese women's status in the 21st-century, gender studies and gender relations had become one of the hottest topics in Chinese society, which consequently prompted Chinese Women's Cinema to attract the attention of larger audiences. Therefore, many researchers have focused their research on Chinese Women's Cinema, but at present, it seems that there is still a research gap to discuss and analyze the changes in women's status and identity in China in recent years. This paper will take the famous early Chinese Women's Cinema *Raise the Red Lantern* as an example for discussion and analysis. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the oppression of women in Chinese feudal patriarchal society through the details in the film *Raise the Red Lantern*. The significance of this paper is to appeal for gender equality in China by analyzing the oppression of women by the feudal patriarchal society in the film *Raise the Red Lantern*. Through careful analysis and research, it is concluded that the film *Raise the Red Lantern* profoundly criticizes the oppression and exploitation of women and vulnerable groups by the Republic of China through shooting details. At the same time, it is in sharp contrast with the independent thought and social status of Chinese women in the 21st-century.

**Keywords:** Chinese cinema, feminism, gender studies, Chinese feudal patriarchal society

The independent consciousness and thoughts of Chinese women in the 21st century is constantly improving and awakening, becoming the mainstream culture of China. Women in China gradually receive higher education in the 21st century and have innovative thinking. An increasing number of women in China have the courage to leave their homes and actively participate in social work and activities in order to appreciate their life value and personal charm. Therefore, research on gender is a scorching topic in today's Chinese society. Many scholars actively participated in the analysis and discussion of gender, and many have made significant contributions to feminist studies and women's independence in China. In addition, film art is a relatively intuitive and straightforward artistic expression, and the plot in the film can accurately and vividly reflect and criticize many real phenomena in the current Chinese society. As a consequence, many researchers discuss and analyze the changes of women's status and identity in China in recent years through the changes of female roles and film plots. The topic of this essay is "How does the film *Raise the Red Lantern* explore the oppression of women by the patriarchal society in China?". The motivation of this essay is to discuss the oppression of women in Chinese feudal patriarchal society through the details in the film *Raise the Red Lantern*. The purpose of this essay is to appeal for gender equality in China by analyzing the oppression of women by feudal patriarchal society in China in the film *Raise the Red Lantern*. This essay will examine the background of the Republic of China and the main

plot of the film *Raise the Red Lantern*. Furthermore, the social meaning expressed and reflected in the filming and release of the film *Raise the Red Lantern* will be discussed, while analyzing how the details and metaphors in the film *Raise the Red Lantern* reflect the oppression of women in the feudal patriarchal society in China. In the bargain, the essay compares the changes of women's status in different periods in China, portraying what true female independence is, in addition, the manner in which the development of women's status in China is effectively promoted.

Situated in the eastern part of Asia, the Republic of China began in 1920 and ended in 1949. It is the first democratic republic in Asia to be established following the Revolution of 1911. It was also named as China before the end of the Qing Dynasty and the founding of the People's Republic of China. At this point, the Republic of China was in great turmoil and instability due to the wrong leadership of the rulers of the Qing Dynasty. This also led to the lack of contact and interaction with countries during the Republic of China and the lack of hopes and dreams in the lives of citizens. Therefore, the Republic of China was in darkness and pain at that time. Given that, the Republic of China was in a period of national closure; the people and the government lacked innovative thinking and open thinking. Thereby, this led to the continuation of feudal Confucianism in the Republic of China, with the country's main economic source being agriculture. Men with labor force occupy most social resources and become leaders and rulers of society. As a result, within the Chinese feudal patriarchal society, women have no right to speak and choose, relying entirely on men for survival. Besides, the scope of women's activities in the Republic of China was mainly family, and the most important task of women was to take care of the family and have children.

The film *Raise the Red Lantern* is a love story directed by the Chinese famous director Zhang Yimou, and written by Su Tong and Ni Zhen, starring the Chinese famous actors Gong Li, Ma Jingwu, He Saifei, Cao Cuifen, and Zhou Qi. It was released at the Venice Film Festival on September 10th, 1991, and then in Mainland China on December 20th, 1991. The film *Raise the Red Lantern* is adapted from Su Tong's novel *Wives and Concubines in Groups*. This film conveys the story of an educated girl, Song Lian, who married a man with a wife and two concubines. Initially, her husband dotes on her very much. However, as a result of her straightforward personality, Song Lian loses her husband's favor. Overall, the film portrays an educated girl who is finally driven crazy by the feudal ethics in China and ruined her life in the feudal patriarchal society in China. The film *Raise the Red Lantern* is not only a legendary piece work in Chinese film history but also has significant influence internationally. For example, in 1991, the film won the Silver Lion Award for Best Film at the 48th Venice Film Festival, was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the 64th Academy Awards in 1992, won the Best Non-English Film Award at the 46th British Film Academy Awards in 1993, and won the Best Feature Film at the 16th Hundred Flowers Award in the same year.

The time when the film *Raise the Red Lantern* was filmed and released is of great social significance to Chinese political development, which is worthy of in-depth analysis and discussion. Standrich (2021) and McFarlane (2006) pointed out that the plot of the film *Raise the Red Lantern* reflects the helpless living conditions of the people at the lower class of the Republic of China and the huge social class differences. During the feudal patriarchal society in China, the public security and legal policies was imperfect. The significant difference between the rich and the poor made the relationship between people unequal. Individuals with powerful wealth and social resources are considered to have the most freedom, as they do not need to consider social rules and are not bound by any policies. Nevertheless, people at the bottom of society and women who are unable to work do not have the right to speak and may as a result be humiliated by people in the upper class. Similarly, to the

servant of Song Lian in the film *Raise the Red Lantern*, she was punished by her master in the snow for violating family rules and eventually froze to death. Following the discovery of her dead body in the snow, she was solely given a perfunctory burial. Her death was caused by the male owner, yet since the male owner belongs to the upper class of society; he does not need to bear any responsibility. In the Republic of China, servants, being people at the bottom of society, were treated like objects, and their life and death could be decided by their masters at home. This film was released in 1991 when China was in a period of policy adjustment and all-around development. The filming and release of the film *Raise the Red Lantern* aroused strong discussion and reflection from the Chinese audience. This film profoundly criticized the exploitation and oppression of the vulnerable groups in the old society of China and reflected the expectation of equality for all in the new society of China. After that, this essay will mainly introduce how to reflect on the oppression of women in Chinese feudal patriarchal society and the tragic fate that women cannot resist through the details and metaphors in the film *Raise the Red Lantern*.

The plot of the film *Raise the Red Lantern* shows different seasons, and the expression is very clever and meaningful, which is worth in-depth analysis and discussion. Loeb (2011) pointed out that the shooting and presentation of time in this film is significant, serving as a subtle metaphor for the oppression of women by the patriarchal society in China. In the beginning, Song Lian walks from her own home to her husband's home alone in short white sleeves and a long black dress and marries him. There is a scene in the film in which Song Lian immediately puts down her luggage as soon as she enters her husband's house, walks to the water tank, and starts to fetch water to wash her hands and face, and then breathlessly tells the housekeeper that it is too hot today. It can be clearly inferred that the beginning of the film is set in summer, as evident through the dress of Song Lian, her actions after entering the door, and her words. Afterwards, with the development of the film plot, it can be inferred that autumn occurred according to the changes in the clothes of the female characters and the weather conditions. Later on, Song Lian found her servant secretly lighting lanterns in her own room. Lantern symbolizes auspiciousness and good luck in Chinese culture. However, the servant was in a low position in the social system and had no right to use this ornament. In order to attract her husband's attention and love, Song Lian reported her servant to her husband. Hence, given that servant lit a lantern in her room privately, she was punished by the master in the snow, freezing to death. Through this observation, it can be inferred that the plot of the film was developed into winter. Given that, Song Lian is an educated girl; she yearns for a life of freedom and looks forward to love. Thus, she could not accept the traditional feudal ethics in China. Ultimately, Song Lian was driven crazy by the patriarchal society, ruining her life. In the end of the film, Song Lian once again changed into the clothes that she walked into her husband's house on the first day (short white sleeves and long black dress), which suggests that the season has returned to summer. Another detail in the film is that Song Lian only experienced one birthday in her husband's home, which shows that she and her husband have been married for one year. Overall, it is evident that this film covers summer, autumn, and winter, yet there is no spring. This detail in the film plot also implies that there is no spring for Chinese women in the feudal patriarchal society in China. It represents a lack of hope and future for women in China at that time, leaving only the endless darkness and pain from the oppression of the patriarchal society.

The distribution of courtyard space in the film *Raise the Red Lantern* clearly provides a metaphor for the oppression of women in China by the feudal patriarchal society in China and feudal ethics. Lee (1996) and Loeb (2011) pointed out that the overall space design and environmental layout of the film *Raise the Red Lantern*, although monumental in scale and overlapping in levels, provide the audience a depressing and gloomy feeling.

Given the historical background of the film *Raise the Red Lantern* is China in the 1920s, the architecture and house design in the film align with this to express the unique historical architectural features of China, particularly considering the colour scheme. In the Chinese feudal patriarchal society, the residences of the wealthiest citizens were dominated by quadrangle dwellings, a unique building in China. This is a square building with a front yard and a back yard. Considering the social background, most of the men in the family lived in the front yard, and women lived in the back yard. This distribution and arrangement also implies that men in China have absolute freedom and choice to go out and socialize unconditionally. Nevertheless, women in China have no right to leave the home. As presented in the film *Raise the Red Lantern*, the man's wife and concubines each have their own yard. It is evident that they do not have the opportunity to go out and enjoy the outside world and scenery. At the beginning of the film, Song Lian, as an educated girl, could not understand this feudal tradition, but as time went on, she gradually realized that in this old feudal society, women had no choice but to rely on men. From then on, Song Lian learned to compete for a favor, which also represented that Song Lian was gradually domesticated by these feudal ethics. These Chinese women can only live in this narrow yard all their lives, and the only thing they can expect every day is that their husband can think of themselves one day and is willing to come to their yard to accompany them. The writing of "imprisonment" in the Chinese language is 囚. So analyzing a square according to the writing style of Chinese characters is like quadrangle dwellings in China, whereas the 人 is translated into English as a person. This indicates a person who is locked in quadrangle dwellings all her life is imprisoned, which could imply the tragic fate and helplessness of women in the Chinese feudal patriarchal society. At the end of the film, Song Lian was driven crazy; her husband married another concubine, with the fourth concubine also having her own yard. This therefore represents that the tragedy of women in Chinese feudal patriarchal society is ongoing. The narrow courtyard restricts the freedom of women in China, indicating it to be a cage which imprisons these women and delays their youth.

The appearance of the dead house in the film *Raise the Red Lantern* further adds a mysterious sense to the plot of the film, which can enable the audience to realize the tragic fate of Chinese women in the patriarchal society in China. Neo (2004) pointed out that Confucian tradition has a very long history in Chinese society and is deeply rooted in the thoughts of Chinese people; this ancient feudal tradition is considered to bound and restrict the thinking of Chinese people. Dead house is considered the gloomiest place in the film *Raise the Red Lantern*, and it can also be said that it is the ultimate destination of women in feudal patriarchal society in China. In the film plot, the door of the dead house had never been opened, and the inside of the dead house had not been introduced in detail yet was sufficient to make the audience shudder. Song Lian walked around the house in a depressed and bored mood because she did not adapt to the feudal etiquette at home. She accidentally saw a dilapidated house at home. She was curious about what was inside, but the door of the house was locked and could not be opened. After returning to her room and asking her husband what was in the dilapidated house, she was informed to not to go near the dilapidated house. Her husband told her the truth only after Song Lian's questioning. The truth is that Song Lian's husband's father's two concubines committed suicide in that dilapidated house as a result of their husband dying. Song Lian's expression was very shocked after hearing this. As an educated girl, she could not understand why women did not even have the right to choose their own survival. At the end of the film, it can also be observed that Song Lian's husband's second concubine was dragged to that dilapidated house and killed because of her affair with other men. As a consequence, in Chinese feudal patriarchal society, women are men's private property and have no right to choose matters. As a result of the shackles of Chinese Confucianism ideas, once a woman marries her husband, she will devote her life to one man and cannot

have any communication and feelings with other men. When a man dies, his wife and concubines have no reason to live but to die with him. Thereby, the dead house in the film *Raise the Red Lantern* clearly reflects the oppression of women in Chinese feudal patriarchal society.

In the film *Raise the Red Lantern*, many traditional etiquettes in Chinese feudal patriarchal society are suggested to have restricted women's thoughts and freedom. Wu (2021) and Zhu and Han (2021) pointed out that many traditional rituals in Chinese feudal patriarchal society appear to objectify women, enabling men to treat women as if they were choosing goods. At the beginning of the film, when Song Lian has just married her husband, the servants at home specially wash her feet and do a foot massage that night. At first, Song Lian was very unaccustomed, with the series of services causing Song Lian to become very nervous and uneasy. The servant who served her specially told her that foot washing and foot massage are not available every day, rather only when her husband dotes on her and is willing to come to her yard. When Song Lian slept with her husband that night, her husband told her that the most crucial thing for women is their feet. Only when their feet are comfortable can women serve their husbands better. If Song Lian wants to enjoy this type of comfortable service daily, she should attempt her best to serve him well. Song Lian's husband was complacent when he said these words and even felt he desired to stimulate Song Lian's want to serve men. From this detail, it is evident that this feudal tradition is a welfare for women. However, it implies that in the society at that time, women in China could only gain more benefits by relying entirely on men, pleasing them, and winning their favor. Another feudal tradition embodied in the film is to listen to the call. At first, as an educated girl, Song Lian did not understand this secular world very much. The servant explained this custom to Song Lian, stating that every night within the specified time, all the women in the family stood at the gate of their own yard and waited for their husband to choose whose yard to go to that night. Whomever their husband chose, their husband would inform his servants to put a red lantern in front of the yard of the chosen woman, thus representing auspiciousness and happiness. As evident, in the old Chinese society, women in China could be chosen by men just like goods in shopping malls; women have no dignity and ability to resist. This feudal tradition and custom clearly and obviously reflects the oppression of women in Chinese feudal patriarchal society.

In the film *Raise the Red Lantern*, the prop of the lantern runs through the whole film plot, and serves as a significant clue of plot development. Su (2020) and Zhao (2016) pointed out that the lanterns in the film plot represent the status of these women in the home and their husband's love and attention to them. On the first day of Song Lian's marriage to her husband, her yard was covered with red lanterns, indicating that her husband loved her deeply. In the film *Raise the Red Lantern*, other women can observe red lanterns hanging everywhere in their yards, which also signifies that these women can accompany their husband. Every night, a red lantern is hung outside the courtyard of a woman eligible to accompany her husband. These lanterns also symbolize a woman's status in the family. To have a lantern is to have supreme power and gain the attention and love of men. As a consequence, along with the lighting and extinguishing of lanterns, women's fates are also controlled and manipulated by lanterns. The lighting of lanterns represents that women's hopes are lit, and the lantern is extinguished on behalf of women's tragic fate. In contrast, as an educated girl, Song Lian is not likely to rely entirely on men and become their accessory. Song Lian is looking forward to her love and freedom. Song Lian is very uncomfortable with the feudal etiquette and these traditional ethics at home that follow marriage. As a result, she often quarrels with her husband or disobeys his wishes. Gradually, her husband does not care about her, and she also loses her love. Because Song Lian often goes against her husband's idea, he orders his servants to remove all the lanterns from Song Lian's yard, and Song Lian's yard becomes depressed; her life has since

lost hope. This further indicates that she has no chance to accompany her husband and has since fallen out of favor. Another detail in the film represents the lantern as an essential prop in the plot. Song Lian once found her servant secretly hanging lanterns in her room at home. This also reflects that the servant uses lanterns to pin her wishes, and she is eager to be paid attention to by the male owner of the family and become his concubine to get rid of the humble status of a servant. This reflects that women in this film have no other entertainment, and their lives are lonely. The only thing that can hold their feelings is lanterns. The existence of lanterns means that they still have this place in their husbands' hearts. This also shows that women in Chinese feudal patriarchal period could only benefit from men and survive in a cruel society. Subsequently, this essay will compare the changes and promotion of Chinese women's status and identity in different periods of China.

Compared with the tragic fate of women in Chinese feudal patriarchal society, the status of women in China in the 21st century has significantly been improved. Li (2000) and Zhao (2016) pointed out that in the Chinese feudal patriarchal society, women's activities mainly focused on their families, while women in the 21st century gradually entered the workplace and undertook their own careers. Observing the social background of the film *Raise the Red Lantern*, men occupied the majority the social resources and contacts in the feudal society of China, becoming the leaders and rulers of the society. Women in China belonged to a vulnerable group in the old society and had no ability to live independently. They could only survive by being wholly attached to men and becoming their accessories. Nevertheless, with the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China entered a new beginning and starting point. For example, Chinese laws and policies explicitly encourage gender equality. The Chinese government and public departments strongly encourage women in China to go out, actively participate in social life and work, and dare to show their advantages and charm so as to realize their own value. In today's new society in China, women can receive higher education, choose their own favorite employment direction, and express their ideas and opinions on any occasion and place. As a result, a woman's life can be carried out according to her own wishes without being bound to and controlled by anyone. Afterwards, this essay will introduce what is the real independence of women in China.

With the continuous development and progress of Chinese society, Chinese women's sense of independence is gradually strengthening, which has gradually become the mainstream of Chinese society today. Ding (2018) and Zhou (2013) pointed out that the real independence of women in China is to stimulate women's inner and ideological sense of independence and the ability to live independently. Chinese society should enable women to actively participate in various social activities and work, respecting rather than interfering with women's choice and development. Women in China have the right to choose higher education, future lifestyle, and related jobs. Chinese society should clarify that getting married and having children is always a woman's choice, not a woman's task and constraint. As independent women in China, they have the right to decide whether they need to get married or not, and choosing marriage and childbirth should arise from a true desire rather than external interference. The promotion of Chinese women's status in China and the awakening of the consciousness of independence and self-improvement do not want to form gender opposition with men but hope that women can have enough rights to speak and choose in society. Encouraging women in China to go out and actively participate in social work to realize their own value and charm is not encouraging women to give up marriage and childbirth but gives them freedom to have the power and ability to choose marriage and childbirth without having to submit to humiliation for marriage and childbirth. Added to that, the promotion of the elimination of discrimination against women in Chinese society will be analyzed in detail.

Although today's Chinese government appeals for gender equality, but there are still many people holding traditional Chinese values and believe that men and women have a different division of labor in society. These individuals consider that men should have strong thinking and ability, and women should always be men's accessories, indicating attachment. Specifically, that in a marriage, men should provide economic value, and women should provide reproductive value. Thereby, many work units and projects in China are unwilling to employ female employees because of women's marriage and childbirth, implying severe discrimination against women. Thus, for women in China to be genuinely treated equally, the Chinese government should introduce relevant policies and laws, calling for gender equality. For example, in order to prevent women from losing their jobs due to marriage and childbirth, the Chinese government can introduce relevant policies to encourage both men and women to take maternity leave together during the period of female childbirth, and the maternity leave time is the same. Furthermore, in order to make women in China have more cultural and theoretical knowledge, long-term vision, and independent thoughts, the Chinese government can popularize primary and secondary education in an all-round way so that more women can receive education and prevent women in remote areas and rural areas from giving up their studies due to economic difficulties and other reasons. Simultaneously, the Chinese government can also vigorously publicize the value created by women for society and the advantages of charm that women have. Moreover, China could potentially shoot more films related to themes covering women to present women's own abilities and contributions to society, thus calling for gender equality. These can effectively avoid the social neglect of women's own values and discrimination against women, creating a harmonious and friendly atmosphere in society.

In a few words, the topic of this essay is "How does the film *Raise the Red Lantern* explore the oppression of women by the patriarchal society in China?". Through the in-depth analysis and discussion, there is much to be concluded from; the release of the film *Raise the Red Lantern* profoundly criticized the miserable life of the people at the bottom of the old society in China and the huge class differences in society. Added to that, the film *Raise the Red Lantern* serves as a metaphor for the oppression of women in the Chinese feudal patriarchal society through the details of seasons, courtyard space, the dead house, feudal ceremony, and lanterns. Following the continuous development and progress of Chinese society, the identity and status of women in China in the 21st century have improved, enabling independent ideas and consciousness. The enhancement of women's independent consciousness in China is not to be superior to men, but to strive to achieve more choices and discourse rights in society, without having to submit to humiliation for marriage. Although the Chinese government strongly calls for gender equality in China, some individuals who maintain their traditional ways of thinking discriminate against women, which can be reflected in women, still have significant obstacles in their career development. As a result, the Chinese government can issue corresponding laws and policies to deal with this issue. For example, it advocates that both men and women take maternity leave together, popularizes the education of women in remote areas, vigorously promotes the development of women's films in China, and the government vigorously publicizes women's dedication and charm to society, in aim of appealing for gender equality.

### References

- Ding, S. F. (2018). The gradual awakening of women's independent consciousness in China. *At 16 or 17 in Ones Life*, 27(14), 129.
- Loeb, J. (2011). Dissonance rising: Subversive sound in Zhang Yimou's *Raise the red lantern*. *Film-Philosophy*, 15(1), 1-16.
- Lee, J. (1996). Zhang Yimou's *Raise the red lantern*: Contextual analysis of film through a Confucian/feminist matrix. *Asian Cinema*, 8(1), 120-127.

- Li, Y. (2000). Women's movement and the change of women's status in China. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 1(1), 1-12.
- McFarlane, B. (2006). Women beware women: Zhang Yimou's *Raise the red lantern*. *Screen Education*, 42, 111-115.
- Neo, D. (2004). The "Confusion Ethics" of *Raise the red lantern*. *Senses of Cinema*, (33). Retrieved from [https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2004/cteq/raise\\_red\\_lantern/](https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2004/cteq/raise_red_lantern/)
- Standridge, A. (2021). *Raise the red lantern*: A critique of patriarchy in Chinese cinema. *Film Matters*, 12(1), 117-121.
- Su, Z. J. (2020). On the symbolic application of red in Zhang Yimou's film—Taking *Raise the red lantern* as an example. *Home Drama*, 30(6), 74-88.
- Wu, S. F. (2021). Cultural interpretation of the film *Raise the red lantern*. *Time Report*, 12(14), 26-27.
- Zhao, Y. (2016). Analysis on the status of contemporary women. *Contemporary Education Research and Teaching Practice*, 4(11), 88-89.
- Zhu, X., & Han, X. K. (2021). The remodeling of the characters in Su Tong's novels by films—Taking the film *Raise the red lantern* as an example. *New Documentary*, 13(25), 32-34.
- Zhao Y. (2016). On the artistic aesthetics of Zhang Yimou's film—Taking *Raise the red lantern* as an example. *Ming Ri Feng Shang*, 11(19), 74-75.
- Zhou, M. (2013). On the values of contemporary China women from Beauvoir's *Second sex* (Master thesis, University for Political Science and Law of China, 2013).