

**American Cinematic Discourses of Women’s Oppression in Old China:
From *The Good Earth* to *Pavilion of Women***

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Abstract

Discourses of women’s oppression in old China have helped to establish the dichotomization between the “progressive” West and the “passive” China. The description of O Lan’s submission to the Confucian patriarchy in Pearl S. Buck’s bestseller *The Good Earth* (1931) and its Hollywood version in 1937 has appealed to Western imagination across decades. More than half a century later the submissive O Lan was transformed into a rebellious Madame Wu in a US-Sino co-production *The Pavilion of Women* (2001) which was loosely adapted from Buck’s 1946 bestseller with the same title. The film describes Madame Wu’s pursuit of subjectivity with American assistance and ends with a promising communist future. The interwoven narrative strands of women’s individual pursuit, American cultural superiority and China’s revolutionary transformation render the film a key site to examine contemporary American perceptions of China. By comparing the production and reception of *The Good Earth* and *The Pavilion of Women* against their cultural and historical contexts, the essay argues that the filmic narrative of women’s empowerment re-writes the role of the West in China’s project of modernization.

Keywords: American cinematic discourses, women’s oppression, Chinese modernization

Introduction

Discourses of women's oppression in old China have constituted a seminal part of Western knowledge of the Eastern other. No longer the oriental paradise of refined women as described by Marco Polo in the thirteenth century (1968: 322), a deteriorating China reigned by the Manchu Dynasty was projected as a stagnant place in the Western imagination. From Arthur Smith's disparagement of gender inequality in *Chinese Characteristics* (1894), to fictional and cinematic constructions of O Lan's victimization in *The Good Earth* (1931, 1937), to tales of women's plight in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and its cinematic presentation in 1993, to women's tragic rebellion in Chinese art-house hits like *Yellow Earth* (1984) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), women's degradation was established in the Western consciousness as an integral part of the repressive China. The conventional feudal discourse was nonetheless reconfigured in a US-Sino coproduction: *Pavilion of Women* (2001).

Loosely adapted from Pearl S. Buck's 1946 bestseller with the same title, *Pavilion of Women* featured women's oppression and rebellion in a turbulent China caught between the declining Confucian patriarchy and the impact of western influences. Compared to O Lan's tragic fate in an earth-bound China afflicted by locust plagues and political upheavals, *Pavilion of Women* described women's compliance and defiance in a multifarious society of local gentry, foreign influences and revolutionary forces. Released about eight months before China's entry into World Trade Organization (WTO),¹ the film featured how Madame Wu's individualistic growth was assisted by an American missionary doctor during the Japanese invasion and the rise of Communist forces in the 1930s. The narrative described the aristocrat woman's change from the victim/perpetrator of the feudal family to the rebel against the patriarchal authoritarianism. Upon its simultaneous release in China and the U.S. in April 2001, the film failed to impress audiences on either side, probably because of its clichéd message of missionary heroism and/or political maneuvering in its daring alteration of the original novel. Compared with the commercial and critical success of the novel-turned-film *The Good Earth*, the lackluster reception of *Pavilion of Women* which addresses to similar motifs requires closer examination. By situating *Pavilion of Women* against Western discourses of women's oppression in old China, this article examines the intertwining discourses of women's individual pursuit, American enlightenment, China's social transformation and their implications in the film.

Discourses of Women's Oppression in Old China

Women's oppression in feudal China drew prominent Western attention at the cross-cultural encounter in the mid-nineteenth century. Since the notion of women's rights had become a

¹ The entry into the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and later the WTO was seen as "a matter of prestige for an increasingly powerful nation" for the Chinese public (Zhang Yongjin, 1998: p. 238). Since Taiwan has taken the seat in GATT after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the PRC became an observer member in 1984 and have re-applied for an official membership since 1986. At China's entry into WTO, the BBC predicted that "China is both a huge unfolding marketplace for the world's exporters and a powerhouse of manufacturing that could swamp the developed western nations" (13 June 2002). For further discussion, see Yongjin Zhang (1998).

signifier of social development along with the advancement of western modernity,² the notorious cruelty of foot-binding and female infanticide in the Chinese society was abhorred by the collective western mind. While the West came to terms with the rising gender consciousness, as demonstrated by publications like Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and Ibsen's controversial drama *A Doll's House* (1879), an American missionary account *The Chinese Slave-girl: A Story of A Woman's Life in China* (1880) disturbed the Western public.

The misogynist tradition was taken as a metaphor of retrogressive China in the West. The "insecurity of the life and happiness of woman" was seen as the "weakest parts of the Chinese social fabric" by the American missionary Arthur Smith (1919, p. 286). In his *Chinese Characteristics* (1894), the critique of the absence of sympathy towards women's degradation appealed to Chinese intellectuals. Lu Xun, disillusioned by the newly established Republic of China (1912–1949) for its unfulfilled promise of freedom and equality, urged his students to read Smith's books to understand the Chinese situation (Liu, 1995, pp. 45–87). Despite some freedom accorded to a small number of elites, the majority of women remained shackled by Confucian doctrines. For more than two thousand years, Chinese women were fastened to the bottom of the hierarchical family structure via a set of conventions and customs. The Confucian classic *The Book of Rites* dictated a "strict sexual and generational division of labor" to confine women to the domestic sphere, based on the assumption of their psychological, physical and mental inferiority (Andors, 1983 p. 12). "Few societies in history," stated Kay Ann Johnson, "have prescribed for women a more lowly status or treated them in a more routinely brutal way than traditional Confucian China" (1983, p. 1). Though mothers could manage family property, intervene in marital lives of younger generations or even preside over the household, women were generally deprived of existence outside the family. Throughout history the cultural devaluation of women became legitimized and institutionalized with women's active or passive complicity. Their reproduction of the patriarchal hegemony verified Antonio Gramsci's argument that hegemony consisted of the "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population" (1971, p. 12). The subjugation of women was nonetheless subject to change at the dawn of the twentieth century when Confucianism was denigrated as a hindrance to China's modern development.

The call for improving women's status in China was propelled by Western influences and the rise of Chinese nationalism. The expansion of Western ideas was based on the assumption of China's inability to transform itself from within. Dismissed by Hegel as "a natural vegetative existence" isolated from the civilized world in 1837 (1956, p. 142–3), China's "rotting semi-civilization" inculcated "hereditary stupidity" in its population according to Karl Marx (Marx & Engels, 1968, pp.13–16; 111–118). His prediction that the march of Western capitalism would eventually replace Oriental despotism and the Asiatic Mode of Production embodied popular Western sentiments about China (O'Leary, 1989, p. 69). The lack of progressive impetus in Chinese cultural tradition, in contrast to the "Protestant ethic" which stimulated the development of capitalism in the U.S., was argued to account for China's

² Despite the capitalist exploitation of women in the workforce underlined by various forms of patriarchal domination, women gained some economic independence outside the patriarchal family and participated in the public sphere. For further discussion, please refer to Rita Felski (1995), Ellen Jordan (1999) and Bonnie S. Anderson (2001).

decline in modern world (Weber 1968, 1985). Assured of the country's inability of self-government, the West penetrated into China through the acquisition of foreign concessions and treaty ports after the Opium Wars. Since American missionaries saw China as a protégé of the U.S. and took "America Assists the East" as their mandate (Tuchman, 1972, p. 39), they played a leading role in setting up hospitals, orphanages and schools. They also strived to reform the misogynist tradition by advocating the abolishing of female infanticide, child marriage and foot-binding. Consequently, girl's schools established by some progressive Chinese elites began to rise in the urban areas after 1900 (Yu, 1988, p. 181–182). Kang Youwei, a political-engaged intellectual who launched the Hundred Days' Reform at the end of the Manchu dynasty, organized the first "Unbound-Foot Society" in 1882 on the grounds that "crippled women . . . would produce weak children and be unsatisfactory mothers" (Jayawardena, 1986, p. 178).

Women's emancipation in China was intertwined with the nation-building discourse in the modern era.³ Since the founding of the Republic in 1912 failed to transform Chinese society which was plagued by residues of feudalism and imperial powers, the Chinese intelligentsia sought to create a new national culture by adopting western models of science, democracy and individual freedom in an upsurge of occidentalist fantasy (Chen, p. 2007). In the foreign-inspired New Culture Movement (1915–1923) which generated the birth of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and culminated in the May Fourth Movement during China's degradation at the 1919 Versailles Treaty, women's liberation was often utilized for the nationalist agenda. From the massive idolization of Nora's romantic individualism (He, 2008), to Lu Xun's description of a widow's victimization in "The New Year Sacrifice" (1924), to the leftist discourse of women's awakening as national salvation in films like *Xin nü xing* (*New Women*, 1934) and *Ma lu tian shi* (*Street Angel*, 1937), to the CCP's mobilization of women in the revolutionary transformation of the 1930s and 1940s,⁴ the Chinese narratives of women's liberation were contextualized in the matrix of confronting Confucian authoritarianism and Western imperialism and constructing modern nationhood (Larson, 1988).

Despite these multifarious narratives about "Westernized" or "liberated" women in China, Pearl S. Buck's portrayal of the peasant woman O Lan captured the American public. Buck lived in China intermittently from 1892 to 1934 and witnessed the tumult that accompanied the Manchu dynasty's slide into anarchy and revolution. Exposed to the patriarchal domination of her missionary father and the misogynist culture of Chinese society (Yoshihara, 2003, p. 150), Buck featured O Lan's tragic fate in her most acclaimed work, *The Good Earth* (1931). Being critical of the superficial importation of western culture as a means of freedom, Buck saw the "voiceless" peasants as China's "strength and glory" (1933), and created iconic

³ For a critique of the patriarchal discourse in Chinese women's liberation, see Elisabeth J. Croll (1978) and Shu-qin Cui (2003).

⁴ Nira Yuval-Davis observed that Chinese male intellectuals perceived their feelings of disempowerment resulting from the processes of imperial subjugation "as processes of emasculation and/or feminization. The (re)construction of men's – and often even more importantly women's – roles in the processes of resistance and liberation has been central in most such struggles" (1997: p. 67). As early as 1919, Mao Zedong, the future paramount leader of the CCP, advocated for women's emancipation by raising a women's revolutionary army. For further discussion, please refer to Stuart R. Schram (1969) and Nira Yuval-Davis (1997).

Chinese characters for generations of American readers (Isaacs, 1958, pp. 155–159). The bestseller spilled onto the Hollywood screen in 1937 during America's nationwide sympathy towards the Chinese victimized by Japanese military imperialism, whose ambition to establish a Japan-led "Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere" threatened the U.S. geopolitical interests in Asia (Hart, 2008, p. 231).

Compared with the emphasis on Wang Lung's family saga in the novel, the highlighted role of O Lan on screen had a profound influence upon the collective American psyche. Winning its player Luise Rainer an Academy Award, the image of O Lan was placed alongside Marco Polo as constitutive of the public knowledge of China (MacKinnon & Friesen, 1987, p. 120). Scenes of O Lan toiling in the vast rural landscape, giving birth in the wheat-field and breeding the family create an impression of the Earth mother figure with epic grandeur. The sentimental ending of Wang Lung mourning his diseased wife deviates from the novel in which O Lan's lonely death does not stop the husband from taking a concubine. Starting with O Lan's marriage and ending with her death, the film romanticizes the peasant woman's sacrifice and virtue to sustain the patriarchal family regardless of the socioeconomic transformations. The presumably universal analogy between the primitive O Lan and the ancient land renders China an ethereal space removed from modern history.

To contemporaneous American audiences witnessing women's accomplishments from aviation pioneer Amelia Mary Earhart to tennis champion Marian Anderson, O Lan's slavish faith and silent perseverance on screen evoked mixed feelings of pity, sympathy and condescension. These sentiments permeated many of Buck's writings about China and Chinese women. Both empowered and limited by her outsider status of a "civilized" American woman observing the pre-modern Chinese society, Buck sought to "universalize" the narrative and "racialize" her Chinese subject by situating the Chinese woman within the quotidian domestic life (Yoshihara, 2003, p. 158). When Buck's feminist edge became more manifest in her novel *Dragon Seed* (Buck, 1942) in which a farmer's wife left her newborn baby for the anti-Japanese battle, the revolutionary woman did not achieve the impact of O Lan. The fact that Katharine Hepburn's role as the farmer's wife in the Hollywood adaptation of *Dragon Seed* (1944) failed to win an Oscar nomination indicated that American audiences were more accustomed to see Chinese women as submissive victims. Women's tragic lot in China, a recurrent tale in Hollywood films like *The Toll of the Sea* (1922), *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1932) and *Shanghai Express* (1932), led to the critical observation that "death of Asia" constituted a predominant motif in American cinema (Moy, 1993, pp. 82–100). In this spirit, the proposal to turn Buck's second biggest bestseller *Pavilion of Women* (1946) into a film was denied by Hollywood censors on the ground of Madame Wu's impatience with her marriage (Buck 1955).

More than half a century later, *Pavilion of Women* was adapted into a US-Sino joint production with a shift of focus in the narrative structure. The Chinese official discourse of woman's liberation and socialist transformation could be detected in this film along side with the standard message of American cultural superiority. Compared to O Lan's blind loyalty to patriarchal feudalism in *The Good Earth*, *Pavilion of Women* proposes to assimilate women's

liberation and Western assistance into China's revolutionary transformation on screen. The film modifies the denunciation of the retrogressive China and describes women's struggle to grasp their own destiny, indicating the internally generated change in China. The following will explore how the reconfiguration of the feudal narrative both reproduces and disturbs conventional Western imagination.

Women's Liberation as Social Transformation

The production of *Pavilion of Women* mirrored the interwoven discourses of US-Sino geopolitical relationship and global capitalism. As the first Buck novel filmed with mainly a Chinese cast, the making of the film suggested the re-assessment of Buck in China during the relaxed political climate. Declared *persona non grata* by the Chinese government for her bitter critique of the Communists in the 1940s, Buck and her works fell into oblivion in China even after the US-Sino rapprochement (Conn, 1996, p. 372). It was not until 1994 that the official ban on her books was rescinded in the surge of thought liberation accelerated by Deng Xiaoping's inspection tour of Southern China in 1992 (Patterson 1992; Melvin 1999). At the same time when China strived to assert its place and voice on the world stage, such as its multiple applications for entry into WTO and acclaimed role to stabilize the international market during the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998, Hollywood craved for the huge Chinese market and lobbied for the granting of Permanent Normal Trading Relations with China on October 10, 2000. To “get a foothold” in China, Universal Studios agreed to fund *Pavilion of Women* in cooperation with the state-owned Beijing film studio, especially with a paltry budget (Lin 1999).

The cinematic narrative of women's liberation via American assistance in *Pavilion of Women* nonetheless failed to attract Chinese and American audiences. Promoted as the first “Chinese-made Hollywood film” in *People's Daily* on April 2, 2001, the film was seen as a leap forward for the Chinese to intervene in American discourses about China. The advertising materials, such as the claim of the first-ever “positive” cinematic depiction of CCP in America, or producer Luo Yan's joking that she was seen as *the* Chinese woman commanding a group of American men, revealed the penchant of flirting with a nationalist sentiment (Deng 2001). Across the ocean in the U. S., the marketing discourse exaggerated the film's exotic appeal instead. The sensational wordings like “American pries . . . forbidden liaison with a beautiful aristocrat” in a “world of danger, temptation, and obsession” overwhelmed the feminist edge of the film. In the context of commercial entertainment, *Pavilion of Women* directs the tale of an American missionary saving Chinese women towards a rather unusual ending of women's regeneration in the Communist revolution. Such reductive treatment of the literary classic and real-life history into sentimental theatricality elicited multiple criticisms. From the Chinese dismissal of its claim of American superiority, to the American criticism of its political bias (Thomas 2001), *Pavilion of Women* evoked an anachronistic experience in view of China's rise on the global stage.

The cinematic alterations to the original novel demonstrate the convergence of women's liberation and Chinese national awakening under the mechanism of cooptation. The novel

begins with Madame Wu's momentous decision on her fortieth birthday to buy her husband a concubine to relieve herself of the connubial obligations. As the *de facto* head supervising the household, Madame Wu ventures into intellectual exploration by listening in on the tutorial sessions of Brother Andre, an Italian priest hired to teach her son English. Impressed by Andre's gentle persuasiveness about spiritual freedom and commitment to the Chinese orphans, she starts to examine her life in a new light and discovers her love towards the foreigner after his murder by local robbers. The novel ends with Madame Wu's matriarchal supervision of the family and orphanage while communing with Andre in spirit. While paying homage to the novel's sentimental romanticism and Christian humanism, the film offers a melodrama of scandalous affairs, oriental sex, political turmoil and women's struggle for individuality. Compared with the relatively marginal role of the Italian priest in the book, Andre is portrayed as a powerful American missionary-doctor facilitating the dissolution of the feudal family in the film. Under his influences, Madame Wu is transformed, the concubine Qiuming is redeemed, and Madame Wu's son Fengmo is enlightened. Despite Buck's reservation about the "seething mess" brought out by revolutionary forces in China (Buck, 1928, p. 1929), the film treats the Chinese revolution in a positive light. In contrast to the book account of Fengmo's joining the Kuomintang government army (KMT), the young man's involvement in the underground Communist activities in the film is cast in an idealistic light probably out of political predilections. To enhance the film's exotic appeal, the filmmakers manufacture the transgressive Madame Wu-Andre and Fengmo-Qiuming romance as a secondary plotline which is rather burdensome. At Andre's noble sacrifice to save women and children from a Japanese air raid in 1938, the low-angle camera capturing his fall in slow motion celebrates the spirit of religious martyrdom. Andre's death not only provides a textual solution to his illegitimate feelings towards Madame Wu, but also erects the Japanese imperialists as the ultimate villain destroying the constructive interaction between the American and the Chinese community. The most significant alteration is the narrative of Madame Wu's radical transformation from a feudal matriarch to an Ibsenesque Nora-like figure that breaks free from patriarchal constraints. Despite its strenuous effort to interweave these narrative strands, the film is criticized for "battling with itself" (Koehler 2001).

Madame Wu is depicted as a complicated character caught between the yearning for freedom and the submission to the patriarchal family. After decades of service to the family, Madame Wu murmurs to her mirrored image "it is time to do something. Otherwise I'll feel sorry for myself" in a mock monologue. In this classic moment of reflection to the character/audience, the mirror shot emphasizes Madame Wu's preoccupation with self-identity in a momentum of mid-life crisis. Feeling suffocated by the quotidian domesticity like a "frog living in a well," Madame Wu is determined to change her drab life. Under the disguise of wifely virtues particularly applauded by the Chinese gentry, Madame Wu purchases a young concubine Qiuming to extricate herself from sexual obligations to the Lord. Prioritizing intellectual pursuits over connubial obligations, Madame Wu exemplifies a distinctive yearning for individual subjectivity. The moral ambiguity of exploiting the poor orphan girl in exchange for her own limited freedom seems not to bother Madame Wu who prides herself upon saving Qiuming from starvation. As the beneficiary and perpetrator of the feudal convention,

Madame Wu is accustomed to making necessary compromises. In another occasion, Madame Wu employs Andre to teach her son English so that he is better qualified for the arranged marriage between the two aristocratic families. In the contemporary Chinese fad of getting some western education as a signifier of open-mindedness, Madame Wu honors the feudal practices against Fengmo's will. Although embittered by the patriarchal repression, Madame Wu is still constrained by the feudal conventions. The spiritually bewildered Chinese woman is eventually led to the pursuit of individual freedom under the supervision of Andre.

The narrative constructs Andre as a charismatic figure of significant influence in the Chinese community. At his first screen appearance, Andre breaks into a delivery room to save Madame Kang with a surgical operation to the abhorrence of Madame Wu and other Chinese folk. Assuming the status of a modern intruder into the largely conservative Chinese community, Andre often commands the situation while the Chinese characters stand aside and look at him in reverence. He tends to the poor and cures the sick, and more importantly, stimulates the intellectually hungry Madame Wu. In his tutorial sessions covering a wide range of subjects like music, geography, astronomy and western dress, Madame Wu is invigorated and turns out to be a most articulate student. When Andre spins a wheel to generate electricity, a curious Madame Wu shades her eyes from the illumination of the bulb, touches the gadget in wonder and widens her eyes in surprise. The symbolic scene of enlightenment is followed by a succession of off-screen conversation in which Madame Wu and Andre exchange ideas about individual happiness and familial obligation, freedom of soul and arranged marriage, westerners' Christian belief and Chinese pragmatism. The catechism-like questions applaud the spiritual loftiness of American individual convention over the constraining Chinese society. The juxtaposition of the voice-over dialogue and the montage sequence of Madame Wu's management of the household suggests her newly acquired vision in the wake of Andre's instruction. Previously secluded from the outside world, Madame Wu is able to expand her intellectual horizons at Andre's gentle encouragement. The American messenger thus launches the dual task of awakening Madame Wu to Western modernity and assisting her ventures beyond the feudal constraints.

Andre's power of enlightenment is further demonstrated by the transformation of Madame Wu's son Fengmo. As a liberal-minded youth, Fengmo is distressed by the feudal family, unhappy with the arranged marriage and disillusioned by the KMT government's ineffectual resistance against the Japanese. At Andre's tutorial sessions the young man craves for the vision of freedom and equality in American society. At Fengmo's arrest for his involvement in underground Communist activities, Andre comes to his rescue and wins the admiration of Fengmo, who later reveals his forbidden love towards Qiuming. Ashamed of his degenerate birth father, Fengmo somehow sees Andre as a surrogate father figure and even accepts the extramarital affairs between Andre and his mother after the initial shock. At the encouragement of Andre, Fengmo leaves the feudal family and eventually joins the Communist army alongside with Qiuming. Having facilitated Fengmo's change from an angry young man to a Communist soldier, Andre plays a paternal role in nurturing modern individuals. The disintegration of the feudal family is more powerfully demonstrated by Madame Wu's sexual awakening as an essential segment of her transformation.

The resurgence of the habitually repressed female sexuality adds a new layer to the classic feudal narrative. Compared to the rough categorization of reproductive or seductive femininity in *The Good Earth*, *Pavilion of Women* features Madame Wu's sexual awakening as a token of her realization of individuality. In Madame Wu's long marital life based upon obligation, the tyrannical husband wears her out with constant sexual demands. In several chamber scenes, Madame Wu cannot communicate with the husband who indulges in physical pleasures of wine, opium and oral sex. Beneath the façade of patriarchal authority, the Lord has neither strong will nor intellectual curiosity in contrast to the heroic Andre or the spiritually minded Madame Wu. Struggling with the feudal regulation of women's sexual mores and yearning for freedom, Madame Wu withdraws her previous accusation of Qiuming's "shameless seduction" of her son and learns to understand the plight of the low-class concubine. Arguably out of a transcending bond of "sisterhood", she agrees to send Qiuming away to a missionary school at Andre's recommendation. *En route* home after seeing Qiuming off, Madame Wu and Andre are forced to take shelter by a convenient thundershower in a deserted temple and consummate their forbidden love with a prolonged kiss. Madame Wu, previously submissive to women's fate as man's sex tools, is suddenly awakened to her own sexuality. As a bombastic crescendo of violins intensifies this moment of physical intimacy in the soundtrack, Madame Wu trembles at Andre's caress and responds with equal passion. Overwhelmed by such alien sensations which are denied to her in the feudal marriage, Madame Wu seems regenerated in the exhilarating surge of love. The encounter with her own individuality functions as a liberating momentum to prompt Madame Wu's break from patriarchal constraints.

The latter half of the narrative constructs Madame Wu as a Chinese version of Nora in pursuit of independence. Reminiscent of Nora's determined walking out of the bourgeois family in *A Doll's House*, Madame Wu refuses to be her husband's private property and decides to leave the feudal family during an air raid. At the moment of national and familial crisis caused by Japanese invasion, Madame Wu finally gets a taste of freedom that has been denied her in the Confucian patriarchy. In response to the husband's threatening "without Wu family you are nobody" and subsequent imploring for her accompany, the tearful woman speaks in an almost condescending tone: "You don't understand . . . not this time." Refusing the assigned role as the faithful wife, Madame Wu literally breaks away from the husband's clasp and walks out of the courtyard in a symbolic split with the feudal imprisonment. The winding path of the women's individual pursuit and China's modern transformation converge in the film epilogue. Set in 1941, three years later after Andre's death, a tracking shot moves away from the deserted Wu compound towards the expanse of open space where a much more relaxed Madame Wu plays with Andre's orphans in a green meadow. In this manufactured paradise sheltered from the warfare, the children announce their names such as "Faith", "Mercy" and "Charity" with smiles. When her son and Qiuming in Communist military uniforms wave from a hilltop afar, Madame Wu has a fantasized vision of re-uniting with Andre as the camera circles around the couple in a classical Hollywood scenario of romance. With the camera pulling away from the happy reunion, the film ends in an aerial view of the land veiled by misty clouds. This moment might be a "spectacular rendition of Pearl Buck's missionary fantas" as it places the Chinese people and land under the celestial vision of

western origin (Zhang Yingjin, 2003, pp. 17–23).

Conclusion

The conscientious juxtaposition of America's civilizing influences and women's liberation in *Pavilion of Women* exemplifies a nuanced China narrative. The pro-leftist discourse of assimilating western influences and women's liberation into the Communist revolution in the ending echoes the occidentalist fantasy of the New Culture Movement by linking women's empowerment with China's national awakening. The emergence of "new" women seeking after true love or autonomous subjectivity was deemed as part of China's modernization project amidst the encroachment of foreign powers and constraining Confucian traditions (Schwarcz, 1986; Chow, 1991). When leftist gender ideology took the lead in the 1930s, women were encouraged to walk out of patriarchal family to participate in social reform as men's equal. The fate of Qiuming bespeaks a manifestation of the outstanding feminist-nationalist alliance in China's modern history. Compared to the book account of her unrequited love towards Madame Wu's son and reunification with her lost maternal family, the film describes Qiuming's transformation from a feudal concubine to a communist soldier, a well-reiterated tale in revolutionary classics such as *Bai mao nü* (*The White-haired Girl*, 1950) and *Hong se niang zi jun* (*The Red Detachment of Women*, 1961). *Pavilion of Women* thus combines China's official gender ideology with the conventional Western imagery of old China and anticipates a revolutionary China consisting of open-minded intellectuals and transformed women. The assimilation of women's liberation into the revolutionary enterprise, on the other hand, evokes cynicism from the West as one American viewer commented that the epilogue "could have been scripted by Chairman Mao."⁵ The lukewarm reception of the film in the U.S. might be attributed to its implicit challenge of American-centeredness.

The rewritten feudal narrative of women's oppression in *Pavilion of Women* re-accesses the role of the West in China's modernization project. The film reverses Hollywood's conventional trajectory of consigning Asian characters to death by featuring the sacrifice of the American missionary. Andre's death is a textual necessity without impinging on the domain of Western imperialism, since the transformed Madame Wu, Fengmo and Qiuming will absorb his spirits constructively into the building of a "new" China. Out of the ruins of the feudal family emerges a new type of inter-personal relationships based on equality, liberation and devotion to the communal good. The rendering of American cultural influences as a kind of "heritage" illustrates a shade of China-centered narrative which is echoed in another US-Sino co-production *Shadow Magic* (2000) about China's first encounter with cinema at the beginning of the twentieth century. The tale of a British fortune-seeker displaying the Lumière brothers' shorts in Beijing ends with his expulsion and his young Chinese apprentice taking over as "an early specimen of 'enlightened Chinese'" to shoot films about local people and local scenes (Xu, 2007, p. 60). The narrative of assimilating Western influences into China's social reform in these co-productions suggests a rising tendency of Chinese intervention in constructing American images about China. The self-empowering discourse of women's emancipation and the vision of a progressive China

⁵<http://www.filmjournal.com/filmjournal/reviews/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1000696791>

with the surge of revolutionary passion in *Pavilion of Women* disturb the Western cultural complacency to a certain extent. If the submissive O Lan in *The Good Earth* reproduces and shapes the conventional American impression of an ossified China unable to transform itself from within, women's acquisition of power and agency in *Pavilion of Women* modifies the previous dichotomization between the "progressive" West and the "passive" China based on the Hegelian schema and re-evaluates Western influences in China's project of modernization. With China's emergence as a global power of economic and cultural significances, the cinematic endorsement of women's empowerment in *Pavilion of Women* might be linked to the sophisticated American perception of China in contemporary times.

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