

# Sisterhood, Desire and the Female Subject: Interpreting Rice from a Psychoanalytic Feminist Approach

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**Abstract:** Sibling relationships are usually overshadowed by the exploration of Oedipal relationships and are less often studied, but sisterhood demands attention as a way of exploring modes of female intimacy other than the mother-daughter relationship. While the narrower sense of sisterhood refers only to sisters who are related by blood, the broader sense of sisterhood represents socialised, intimate female relationships. This paper focuses on the portrayal of the narrower sense of sisterhood in the 1995 Chinese film *Rice*, exploring the role of twin structures in the gaze of the central female cinematic figure. I argue that *Rice* successfully portrays a complex, antagonistic and balanced sibling relationship within the social norms of patriarchal order and that the narrative of sisterhood in an Eastern context can enrich multicultural global feminist content and provide a reference to female relationships from different perspectives.

## 1. Introduction

Directed by Huang Jianzhong, *Rice* was only seen by mainland Chinese audiences in cinemas in 2003, rather than the expected 1995. *Rice* is based on the full-length novel *Mi* by mainland Chinese writer Su Tong. Set in the 1920s in the traditional Chinese town of Sichuan, the film tells the story of Wulong, a refugee, and the two daughters of the *Rice* shop owner who takes him in. Although the film focuses on the character development of the male protagonist, Wulong, from a fugitive peasant to a fellow employee of the Rice shop in Dahong to a local gang leader, Huang Jianzhong still portrays the two daughters of the Rice shop's owner. Feng and Li (2021) use psychoanalytic theory to examine the male Oedipal narrative of *Rice's* original *Mi* but do not place Zhi Yun and Qi Yun as sisters in the psychoanalytic feminist perspective on the expression of female desire and sisterhood. As one of Su Tong's most iconic full-length novels, *Mi* succeeds in portraying a more fleshed-out, period-constructed woman with female desires (Wang 2019), a novel that portrays class conflicts and the lives of the underclass, often placing women between oppression and structures of desire, representing the 'decadent tones' of the late century. Wang (1989) and Farquhar (1993), in their study of the same type of film, Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum*, suggest that the portrayal of female sexuality/subjectivity not only unleashes the repression of female desire, but also the subconscious, attempting to express femininity similar to that at the heart of Taoism, offering a political critique of patriarchy and fixed gender structures, representing a poetic disruption. Similarly, despite having an overwhelmingly male protagonist, *Rice* still offers strong female characters for analysis [1-4].

In mainland Chinese cinema, sisterhood involves three modes of expression. The first is the "twin-born model", one of the most remarkable creations of early Chinese cinema, The term 'twins' refers to the phenomenon of twin sisters played by the same actor. In 1933, Zheng Zhengqiu's *The Sisters Flower* was a film about twin sisters growing up in different social environments. The two sisters are played by the same actress, Hudie. The second is the "sacrifice model", in which one of the sisters in a "sisterhood" (usually the older sister) sacrifices or saves her sister in a crisis or at a critical moment, thus completing the process of self-redemption or self-exaltation. In this 'sisterhood', metaphor is often used by the creator, often to compare or refer to 'tradition' and 'modernity', 'present' and 'future'. The most typical example is Yuan Muzhi's *Angel on the Road* (1937). In the film, the older sister Xiaoyun (Zhao Huishen), as a prostitute - a woman with a stain - is alluded to by the creator as a reality with a lot of holes, while the younger sister Xiaohong (Zhou Xuan) - an innocent and beautiful girl - is likened by the creator to the future. In the nick of time,

the sister saves her by offering herself as a sacrifice, not only to redeem herself but also to achieve a sense of sublimity: the death of the 'reality' in exchange for a bright 'future'. The third type of narrative is the 'slice-and-dice' model, which refers to a narrative in which sister relationships (three or more in number) are told and presented one by one in a juxtaposed or layered manner. These sisterhoods can be either narrow or broad. The most typical example of this narrative mode is *The Daughter Sutra*. It is a 'slice-and-dice' of the female characters, showing and telling them in different ways according to their different characteristics, such as vanity, grievance, shrewdness, obsession, depravity, independence, valour, modernity and tradition. Each of them is like a mirror in itself, and together they form "multiple superimposed relationships"[5-7].

In these films, the contrast between the 'sisters' can be seen as a 'superimposed relationship'. The two sides of a coin form a description and interpretation of China in transition: traditional/modern; conservative/open; rich/backward; rough/civilised ..... and so on, further outlining a more compartmentalised society and an ideological emphasis on the narrative. All of the mentioned films were shot in the 1930s, thus I argue that *Rice* provides a studyable text of dual female character content and a modern understanding of sisterhood that helps to expand psychoanalytic feminist theory by placing it in a non-Western context.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Psychoanalysis is an important model for cultural analysis, allowing us to talk about the deeper unconscious meanings of individual films or film systems (e.g. genres) (Benshoff, 2015). Firstly, the study of female subjects should focus on her Oedipus complex, her structure of desire and her sense of self. Desire forms an integral part of the structure of cinema, and the Oedipus complex, a cornerstone of psychoanalytic theory, is the primary narrative for understanding the concept of desire. Desire is seen as a dynamic, pluralistic and fluid force that has the capacity to disrupt, transform and reconfigure (Gordon 2008). Secondly, women are often used in films as objects of desire within the structure of the male gaze. Laura Mulvey (1975) demonstrates that a woman's desire is subordinated to the image of her as the bearer of bleeding wounds; she can only exist in relation to castration, not beyond it. It is necessary to study women's family relationships in narrative cinema. While psychoanalysis tends to focus on vertical paradigms such as the father-son relationship, the sibling relationship serves as a thread for exploring gender relations beyond a Western cultural context of understanding. Yu's (2010) study argues that sisterhood, as a model through which female identity can be explored, can provide a modification to the development of female subjectivity as the 'other'. Siblings are loved by the child in a narcissistic way while being imagined in disgust for murder, as their presence threatens the unique self (Mitchell 2013). Psychoanalytic feminism tends to overlook the importance of sisterhood in the Oedipus narrative and the reconfiguration of relationships between female subjects other than mother and daughter (Rueschman 1994; Yu 2008; Emmet 2016), where sisters can be seen as particular stand-ins for themselves, and for same-sex siblings, the search for roles within the family allows the subject to gender through distinguishing themselves (Rueschmann 1994). Older siblings are idealised as whom the subject wants to be, but can also be experienced as the death of the subject's self (Mitchell 2013). Placing women within the wider social power structure facilitates our understanding of family relationships themselves. Laura Mulvey uses psychoanalytic theory as a political weapon to show how the unconscious in patriarchal societies constructs cinematic forms. The psychoanalytic feminist theory facilitates feminist analysis of the persistent elements of patriarchal social relations through insights into the formation of subjectivity (Stanford 2011). "Gender" cannot be separated from the political and cultural encounters of the patriarchal order, it is produced and sustained within these encounters (Butler 2002). Beauvoir sees women's differences not only as an effect of their social situation (and its power relations) but also as an effect of their choices (and therefore their responsibilities)[8-16].

### **3. Zhiyun and Qiyun: Opposites, Interdependence, the Murderous Self and the Murdered Other**

#### **3.1 Zhiyun as an Object of Male Desire**

The film begins with a scene in which Qiyun and her younger sister Zhiyun went to a men's bathhouse in search of their father in their early childhood, The scene can be seen as a moment of sexual enlightenment for the sisters who are lacking their mother. A flat shot replaces the young Zhiyun's gaze at naked men bathing with a smile on her face. Butler (2002) sees gender as a performance, a secular way of enabling different forms of bodily gesture, movement and style to construct the illusion of an enduring gendered self. This argument sees gender as a mode of constructed social temporality, where gender is a constructed identity, the result of a performance. Liuye, the landlord, asks Zhiyun what she wants, and her father replies for her that he wants a mink coat. This illustrates that while Zhiyun is performative, her desires are defined, she also seems to actively choose her identity and continue to perform it, becoming Liuye's 'possession' and the bearer of male desire as Mulvey (1989) puts it. She locates herself in the identity of 'lacked' and the meaning-bearer, turning her child into a capable reference to her own desire to have a penis and giving way to the father and the legal system.

#### **3.2 Qiyun as the Subject of Power**

Qiyun has more than one identity; she is Zhiyun's sister, the proprietress of a rice shop and her father's assistant. Qiyun helps her father pick up a broom to chase away the victims as they flock to the shop to beg for food as if gender and biological sex show a difference in Qiyun, who exists as a subject of power rather than an object of desire. Butler (2001) explicates Foucault's theory of the dynamic relationship between the subject and the constraints of power, "Constraining power does not only act on the pre-existing subject but also affects the development of that subject; to be subjected to a rule means to submit to it and become a subject." Zhiyun represents the female ego's desire to follow the principles of pleasure, money, emotions and sexuality. Qiyun, on the other hand, represents her 'ego', bounded by the 'superego', whose every action is in line with the traditional notion of what constitutes a proper woman and constrains the desires of the ego. Whereas in a later scene, Zhiyun takes out some silver to scatter to the victims as she rides through them in a palanquin, this contrast demonstrates the antagonistic relationship between the two sisters in their different upbringings, with gender roles referring to a set of social expectations about the appropriateness of the behaviour of people of a certain gender (Kessler 1985), Zhiyun carries the stereotype of being kind and gentle, as opposed to Qiyun, however, wears the mask of being mean and cruel. Qiyun is clearly in cahoots with her father as she makes life difficult for Wulong, reminding him of his class status and reaffirming it. Qiyun also seems to be more prescient, clearly warning her father that Wulong will destroy the family, and she is proven right as the fate of her father, Zhiyun and Qiyun is destroyed by Wulong's revenge. Wulong's rape of Qiyun demonstrates the punishment for transgressions caused by her display of masculinity trapped in the patriarchal order (Butler 2002) and represents the inevitability of Qiyun's eventual dispossession as a biological woman.

#### **3.3 Sisterhoods That Love and Kill Each Other: the Ambiguity of the Self and the Other**

When Zhiyun and Qiyun go to the men's bathhouse to find their father, the film uses the female gaze to build the relationship between the two sisters as they walk among naked men, Qiyun feeling ashamed and fleeing, while Zhiyun still walks curiously to the end of the bathhouse. The initial long shot shows the extremely low visibility of the bathhouse, meaning that the sisters cannot see any specific male penis, which allows them to walk in together. As a man later walks straight toward the sisters, the male genitals are exposed to them, at which point Qiyun is clearly shocked and flees the bathhouse, while Zhiyun does not falter and continues to walk towards her father. Qiyun and Zhiyun seem to be at different stages of Lacan's Oedipus complex, Qiyun is suffering from the castration - realizing she does not possess a penis, while Zhiyun seems to learn to be desired and becomes the phallus itself. Soon she becomes Liuye's concubine and continues to have carnal

relations with different men, which seems to be a function of the characters' existence - - actively becoming the bearer of erotic meaning This seems to be the function of the character's existence - to actively become the bearer of erotic meaning.

As an adult, Zhiyun returns home from Shanghai, she passionately expresses her preference for the city, which in the 1920s served as a settlement for the British, French and American capitalist world colonial system in China, her love for Shanghai implies the contradictory nature of the traditional feudal system and capitalism in her. The brassiere Zhiyun gives her is tied around her head as a headdress, and she is angrily insulted by Zhiyun's mockery of her. Zhiyun's sense of dependency on her sister is perfectly demonstrated by the actor's performance as she wants Qiyun to become an alter ego - wearing Western-style lingerie means accepting a more open mode of sexuality and becoming a capable signifier of male desire. Qiyun's reaction, from her surprise at receiving the gift to her subsequent anger, also shows her feelings towards her sister, as she insults Zhiyun as a 'slut' - her expression is one of unease, repression keeps things away from consciousness, and once something is repressed, it is no longer part of our everyday knowledge (Gordon, 2008), and the reaction to the bra seems to prove the existence of her repressed desire.

The sisters' head-to-head conflict arises over Wulong because families are often the most intimate sites of war, manifestations of domination and spheres of hierarchical values, especially when they masquerade as benevolent social extensions of natural relationships, benign patriarchal power, or even liberal democratic principles (Yu 2006). Qiyun's prevention of Zhiyun's displays of generous kindness towards Wulong does not seem to be due to a dislike of Zhiyun's sexuality, her wariness towards Wulong also indicates her desire to protect her sister, while Zhiyun perceives her sister as jealous. Qiyun's constant persuasion of her sister to give up Wulong represents her love as a sister who has an ambivalent sense of protectiveness and sadism towards Zhiyun, an antithesis of narcissism and self-abuse, as Yu (2006) cites Braunbeck (2006) to illustrate the basic model of bipolarity, which is due not only to the need to distinguish oneself from another person who is very similar to oneself but also to the need to find one's own sphere of identity. Whereas the sister takes on the emotions of her sister as an alter ego, Zhiyun also embodies her attachment to her sister by constantly asking her advice and burrowing her under her sister's covers for warmth. It is interesting to note that the mother of both sisters is not present or mentioned in the film and that the absence of a mother also affects the sisterhood, as Rueschmann (1994) mentions that if the mother is absent or incapacitated sisters may become symbiotic and interdependent figures. The relationship with the sister allows the girl to negotiate her maternal feelings and dependency, being both 'mother' and 'daughter' (Yu 2008). We do seem to see a somewhat symbiotic pattern of attachment between Zhiyun and Qiyun, but the film's more dominant portrayal of their mutual hatred may suggest that we should re-examine such gender constructions - the more complex ones constructed by their different gender performances in addition to their biological gender unity sisterhood.

The interdependence of the two sisters is in part a common rebellion against reality - Zhiyun is the first woman to rise up against male sexual oppression. Since the expression of the female subject's sexuality is forbidden by male society, Zhiyun takes revenge on men in this way. Qiyun, who strongly defends her chastity, uses her hierarchical position to establish herself as a subject of power to resist sexual oppression, acquiring the masculine power of the symbolic phallus from her father and using it against Wulong. But together Qiyun and Zhiyun's resistance slips into the tragedy of forced objectification, the fate of the female body as bearer itself, and they both have to attach themselves to Wulong as the inevitable female figures defined by a patriarchal society.

The erotic scenes between Zhiyun and Wulong in the Rice pile form an interesting triangle relationship in which Zhiyun, as the object of Wulong's male desire, is combined with Rice, which in fact acts as a maternal metaphor for Wulong's desire throughout the film. We have to consider the psychoanalytic role of the metaphor of grain, called "Mother Earth" in an agrarian economy, as Zhiyun, dressed in a white cheongsam, seems to become Rice and carry desire itself. Qiyun, on the other hand, continuously continues to pour Rice onto the pile, hoping to kill her sister and Wulong. I argue that the essence behind Qiyun's complex behaviour is the desire to kill the alter ego and that siblings are not only projections of hateful, divided parts of the self, but can also become idealised

objects to deny frustration and persecution (Rueschmann 1994). The self that Qiyun's unacceptable sister as a carrier of male sexuality maps onto and thus commits murder. After this, Wulong also uses Qiyun as an object of desire and an instrument of resistance. He claims that this is Qiyun's way of paying off his debt to Zhiyun and the whole family, and through this predation, he completes his climb in the social structure. The sisters become “co-sufferers of a man's violation (Mitchell 2013) “, sharing the same fate.

This homogeneity is reflected in the presentation of the same fate for characters of similar social status, such as the similarities between the fate of Liuye's fighter, Bao, and that of Wulong, who takes his place: an affair with Zhiyun, the oppression of refugees (Wulong was humiliated by Bao), and his eventual death. Here we focus on the closure of the fates of Zhiyun and Qiyun as sister female characters. After Qiyun and her father attempt to murder Wulong, the whole family paid a tragic price, and this becomes a turning point in Chiyun's fate; Wulong's rape is the moment when she loses her subjectivity - she, like her sister, becomes an object of desire, objectified as a spectacle by the masculine structure of the gaze (Doane 1981). The film begins with Wulong's invasion of Qiyun's boudoir, a scene in which a steel knife is thrust into a gap in the wood to complete the metaphor of rape; Qiyun repeatedly emphasises her difference from Zhiyun, concerned with her social prestige as a woman rather than her degradation; the film also did not deny Zhiyun's subjectivity as a woman as she rebels against the authority of Qiyun and her father, she shows compassion for the underclass and chooses her own sexual objects. At the same time, Qiyun also experiences the objectification of the subject, the director creating a closed loop from which all the characters cannot escape the cycle that is constructed by the social reality of patriarchal structures.

The symmetrical composition suggests opposition and balance as the two sisters sit in conversation in the hall after the rape of Qiyun. This dichotomy is exacerbated by the dialogue that ensues.

*Qiyun: What do you want me to do when you dump Wulong on me?*

*Zhiyun: Marry him (Wulong), if not marry him, who else? You're a slut now too.*

*Qiyun: It's all because of you! You're a loser! You're the real slut!*

*Zhiyun: You're still acting like you're decent even now. I'm leaving, and this family is left to you.*

Interestingly, Qiyun, who initially accuses Zhiyun as the social norm, is here humiliated by her sister in the same way, with the sisters acting as social voyeurs to each other as symbols of the existence of constrained gender norms of their own. In contrast to the use of the camera to position the viewer as a voyeur (Gordon 2008) in *In The Mood of Love*, where metaphorical desire is constantly bound to the gaze of others and social norms, *Rice* combines the structure of social voyeurism with the relationship between sisters. By discursively indicating the distance between such voyeuristic structures and the spectacle and the interchangeability of the gazed subject, the sisterhood serves as an oppositional balance that can question Mulvey's (1989) 'central female image position' in cinematic eroticism, with the sisterhood allowing women to view themselves in order to gain more reference without having to Farquhar (1993) argues that, unlike the catharsis, self-awareness and restoration of order that pervades Greek tragedy, Chinese drama seeks to show that individuals cannot escape the larger system that defines their lives and that the oppression of order does not come from a vast system of nothingness, but from the closest family itself, and for Zhiyun and Qiyun, even from the repressed other self that resides in the other's consciousness.

#### 4. Conclusion

*Rice* is rich in its portrayal of women, breaking away from their status as objects of gaze to highlight female subjectivity and control over their own destiny, but without acknowledging such agency, the story inevitably slips into tragedy - Wulong is killed by Qiyun while Qiyun suffers near-insanity. Zhiyun dies with her baby in Liuye's home, accompanied by the lullaby Zhiyun sings to her son, but Zhiyun's body is nowhere to be found, except for her jade bracelet, which also seems to prove the end of Zhiyun's life as an objectified subject, creating a Chinese drama that is powerless against the fate of the individual in a vast order - everyone is invisibly trapped, and the instigators are usually victims in return. Zhiyun and Qiyun's relationship is complex and varied yet

oppositely balanced, demonstrating the different possibilities of female relationships. *Rice* discusses sisterhood within a patriarchal symbolic order, signifying a break with the twin structure of the female as the usual central object of the cinematic gaze. The sisterhood is presented as splitting and projection of the self, as a complex consciousness that cares for each other while fantasising about killing each other. The sibling relationship between the two women can be understood from a feminist perspective, placing the sisters directly within the new female structure of the relationship through the absence of the role of the mother, where female desire flows through the interplay of subject and object and contributes to the constant development of the plot, allowing women to observe themselves directly through the sisterhood rather than through the male perspective. At the same time, the portrayal of sisterhood in the Eastern context helps to revise the narrative of sisterhood in a global cultural context, where sisterhood can challenge traditional female relationships and explore new models of female identity.

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