

Postcolonialism in the Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful

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Abstract. The history of colonization has always been expressed in many recent Taiwanese films, either intentionally or unintentionally. The 2017 film *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* is the subject of numerous studies on male gaze or feminist film noir, but few studies inspect its implicit postcolonialism. This study aims to assess the rhetorical manifestation of colonial relationships in *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* within its three main characters. Through discussing and analyzing several examples taken from the film, this study believes that Madam Tang takes the position of the colonizer in the personified colonial relationship, and her two daughters as the colonized. Moreover, two kinds of colonial relationships are discovered, which are colonial stereotype between Madam Tang and Tang Ning and colonial mimicry of Tang Zhen. The findings of the present study appear to be the first systematic research into the film's postcolonialism in terms of its character relationships, which will be helpful in expanding the understanding of the filmic manifestation of colonial relationships worldwide.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful*, Taiwanese films, Film Noir.

1. Introduction

The aftermath of Taiwan's colonized history from 1895 to 1949 has a persistent repercussion on Taiwan's film industry, resulting in a series of films revealing postcolonial traits. Taiwanese films either intentionally or unintentionally narrate, emphasize, and express postcolonialism as a narrative theme [1]. *Seediq Bale* and *The Great Buddha+* are examples of films intentionally discussing the impact that colonialism has on the colonized people, while *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* is among the films that express postcolonialism unintentionally [2-4]. Directed by Yang Ya-che in 2017, *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* talks about the story of the three women in the Tang family, centering on the Machiavellian schemes conducted by women around the Mituo Plan, a development plan that could bring great benefits. The film is a female-dominated film noir, with the three women in the Tang family - Madam Tang, Tang Zhen, and Tang Ning - manipulating people for their benefits through bribery, frame, and murder. Researchers like Teo describe Asian films noir as darker than dark, as they have distinctive contexts compared with their American ancestors [5]. The special context of the Asian variation of film noir, as identified by Collier, is the Confucianism patriarchy characterized by Hong Kong films noir [6]. In *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful*, however, the impact of this Confucianism patriarchy is less transparent, with the absence of a patriarch in the Tang family and the matriarch taking his place. This is identified as a state of fatherlessness by several scholars, which is a unique postcolonial trait in Taiwanese films due to Japanese colonization [7]. The published studies on *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* are restricted to its feminist traits, inspecting the male gaze that dominated the cinematic language or the femme fatale in this film noir [8,9]. These studies argue that despite the fact that the film is a successful attempt to create a film noir whose main characters are all female, but still falls into the cliché of male gaze and patriarchy. However, few writers have been able to draw on any systematic research into the film's postcolonial traits. This study takes the form of a case study to investigate postcolonialism in *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful*, identifying the personified colonial relationship from the character relationships, with several film clips that will be analyzed as examples.

2. Theoretical Framework

The history of being colonized has always been a prevalent theme in Taiwanese films, either portrayed directly or implicitly, repeatedly focusing on postcolonialism and Japanese elements [1].

Postcolonialism generally refers to ‘the complex condition which attends the aftermath of colonial occupation’ which is characterized by anxieties and fears of defeat [10]. These complex emotional aftermaths are frequently articulated as retracing and pursuing the colonial relationship between Taiwan and Japan in recent Taiwanese films [1]. The strong postcolonial theme in *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* can be identified not only through the extensive use of Japanese cultural elements but also in its demonstration of colonial relationships. In this film, the colonial relationship is personified, with Madam Tang, the matriarch of the Tang family, being the colonizer and her two daughters being the colonized. Some excerpts of the film will be analyzed for the personalized colonial relationship as demonstrated by Bhabha [11].

Bhabha stated that postcolonialism is a political and economic relationship that depends on cultural structures to explain or justify its existence through colonial discourse [11]. According to Bhabha, colonial discourse is an apparatus that is powered by acknowledging and rejecting racial, cultural, and societal disparities, and it creates stereotypical knowledge of the colonized that helps establish colonial governance [12]. Stereotypes, as explained by Hudart, deny the sense of identity of a person or a group and have these people’s identities assumed with previous experiences [12]. When it comes to the colonial discourse of stereotyping, it circulates the laziness and dumbness of the colonized through racist jokes or film scenes to justify the superiority of the colonizer. Bhabha placed the production of stereotypes into the theory of the mirror stage. Within this theory, a sense of narcissism and aggressivity intertwines. He identified the coexistence of a violent demonstration of dominance over the other person and signs of narcissistic self-consciousness [12]. Stereotyping knowledge for governance can be observed in a metaphorical sense from the way Madam Tang, the colonizer, treats Tang Ning, the colonized. It is through a set of stereotypes that Madam Tang fixes on her daughter that she establishes her absolute governance in this family, but ambivalence brought about by these stereotypes is, in turn, threatening Madam Tang’s superiority.

As stereotypes are the colonial discourse from the colonizer’s side, mimicry is the discourse from the side of the colonized. Colonial mimicry, as described by Bhabha, is an unconscious strategy of the colonized in response to colonial stereotypes. Bhabha introduced mimicry as the colonized absorbing and modifying the culture of the colonizer through excessive imitation of ideas, customs, language, and culture [12]. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argued that in colonial mimicry, the colonized strive for consistency with the colonizer in any possible sense, but is in essence a repetition with difference [11]. Similar to stereotypes, the other side of colonial discourses, mimicry could also ignite anxiety in the colonizers. As with the colonized wanting to be identical with the colonizer, the apparatus of differentiation upon which the colonial governance is built are threatened, leaving the colonizer separated from what they have to assume to be their actual identity [12]. Another consequence of colonial mimicry, as summarized by Hudart, is related to the existence of intermediates who help the colonizers exert their ruling power. The similarity between the intermediates and the colonizer could ultimately undermine the superiority. There exists a double relationship between Tang Zhen and Madam Tang in *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful*. The first one is the demonstration of colonial mimicry, with Tang Zhen trying to act like Madam Tang, and this mimicry threatens the superiority of Madam Tang’s rule at the end of the film. Moreover, Tang Zhen acts as the intermediate between Madam Tang and Tang Ning, assisting Madam Tang in forging her colonial governance.

In short, the relationships between the three major characters demonstrated in *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* are the personified version of colonial relationships raised by Bhabha, and this will be elaborated in more detail with examples from the film in the next part [11].

3. The Analysis of Personified Postcolonialism

3.1. Introduction of Character Relationship of the Film

Centering on the topic of a loveless future, *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* shows its viewers the Tang family’s story of manipulating politics, money, and human lives, with Madam Tang

being the puppeteer behind the bloody conspiracy. In Madam Tang's scheme, her two daughters, Tang Ning and Tang Zhen, are playing the roles of her puppets, penetrating into the dark, dishonorable aspects of her scheme. Hence, their relationship seems more like a leader-follower dynamic than a mother-daughter one, with Tang Ning being the femme fatale of this film noir and Tang Zhen being the intermediary between the colonizer and the colonized. Over the course of the entire film, the mother-and-daughter love between the three women is distorted, mixed with hatred and utilization, or worse, as a sense of colonization. If discussing the character relationships between Madam Tang, Tang Ning and Tang Zhen through the lens of the colonial relationship theory proposed by Bhabha, Madam Tang is undoubtedly in the place of the colonizer, and the two daughters are the colonized [11]. Being the matriarch of the Tang family, Madam Tang has absolute governance over this tiny territory and the people in it. Certain colonial apparatuses can be observed in the film, from the way of justifying the colonizer's superiority to the way how the colonized reacts to colonial rule.

3.2. The Stereotype and the Femme Fatale

Femme fatale is an integral part of a film noir to allure male characters into their fatal destinies, even within *The Bold*, *the Corrupt*, and *the Beautiful*, a film characterized by female machinations. According to the definition given by Simkin, a femme fatale refers to a beautiful woman who seduces male characters into dangerous conditions with her irresistible sexuality [13]. As the femme fatale of this film, Tang Ning is designed to be seductive, disobedient, and depraved at the same time, as evidenced by her seductive manner and clothes that showcase her attractive figure. From the narrative side, the most distinctive feature of being a femme fatale is that Tang Ning plays the part of approaching men who could be useful for her purpose and would later end up tragically. The relationship between Madam Tang and Tang Ning falls into the category of colonial stereotype if seen under the theory of Bhabha [11]. Bhabha argues that the presumed inferior status of the colonized is manifested and reinforced through intentional advertisements from the colonizers, often portraying negative and stereotypical aspects of the colonized. The same apparatus is at play between Madam Tang and Tang Ning in the stereotyped image of Tang Ning that is created and promoted by Madam Tang. The colonial relationship of the two women and the stereotypical character design is manifested in a scene where Madam Tang's intention of making Tang Ning the vamp is uncovered for the first time.

In a scene where Madam Tang invites Tang Ning to come over and take a look at the new outfits she ordered for the Lin's funeral. Tang Ning crawls close like an animal, excited, then lies on the ground disappointedly after seeing the style of the clothes. In this medium-wide shot, the position of Tang Ning is visually lower than Madam Tang, which indicates an inferior position in the personified colonial relationship, and the animal-like gesture, similarly manifests her subordination. Also, Madam Tang uses a simple 'Hey' to call Tang Ning to come, instead of her real name. According to Aldrin, the name-bearer's perception of identity and self-esteem is affected by their name, and people's relationship between name and identity is constructed by their parents even before they are born [14]. He further elaborates on this relationship by stating that the choice of name is important in social interactions in terms of the way people perceive the identity of the name-bearer [14]. In the interaction between Madam Tang and Tang Ning, Madam Tang chooses not to call Tang Ning by her own name but by an interjection instead, neglecting the identity perception of her daughter that is connected to this name. The use of this ambiguous, improper term deprives Tang Ning of her identity, and once the original identity is denied, a false and stereotypical knowledge can be easily fixed by Madam Tang. In later shots, Madam Tang indicates Tang Ning with a sexy, sheer pajama, suggesting that she should seduce Captain Liao, the police officer who is assigned to the murder of the Lin's, and express her disdain directly at the decadent life that Tang Ning lead. Viewers may have knowledge that Tang Ning is a flirtatious woman who lures men into doing what she commands from earlier scenes. From this scene, however, it becomes clear that it is Madam Tang who is directing Tang Ning into becoming the stereotypical femme fatale and further strengthens the seductive and wicked image. According to Bhabha, the problem of colonial stereotype is that the colonizer denies

the colonized's own sense of identity while imposing their own defective understanding onto the colonized. In the film's personified colonial discourse, Madam Tang, who takes the position of the colonizer, renders Tang Ning into 'a population of degenerate types' [11]. Moreover, by fixing this stereotype into the mindset of Tang Ning, Tang Zhen, and the viewers, Madam Tang is able to justify her government towards the 'supposed inferiority' – Tang Ning [12].

3.3. The Mimicry and the Intermediary

The protocol of film noir suggests that the sexually transgressive femme fatale is set against an opposite female character, a chaste or a virgin type [13]. In this case, this chaste is the other colonized, Tang Zhen. Influenced by Madam Tang, Tang Zhen despises Tang Ning's duplicitous and sexually insatiable style but is internally drawn to it, as evidenced by the beginning of the film when she sneaks a look at Tang Ning having sex. This ambivalence serves as a catalyst for the formation of colonial mimicry, which refers to the colonized mimicking the colonizer with a difference [11]. Tang Zhen sees Madam Tang as an idol and is in awe of whatever facets of her, such as her behaviors, language, and clothes. Viewers may understand this aspect of colonial mimicry in a scene where Tang Zhen is helping Madam Tang prepare drinks for the coming guests despite Tang Ning's disagreement. Tang Ning complains that Madam Tang should not let a kid like Tang Zhen learn to welcome guest, but both of them ignore her. Tang Zhen even interrupts her to recommend a better kind of coffee for treating their guests to Madam Tang. It is evident that Tang Zhen is adopting Madam Tang's hospitality and gradually adapting it, a typical characteristic of colonial mimicry. Moreover, Tang Zhen is also adopting Madam Tang's stereotype towards Tang Ning, but she is adapting this knowledge with stronger disdain. Ignoring Tang Ning's presence and interrupting Tang Ning's words is Tang Zhen's way of expressing her disappointment, both to Tang Ning's degraded lifestyle and to the way she behaves to Madam Tang. From this point, the identity of Tang Zhen is no longer restricted to just a colonized, but also a 'intermediary' [12].

Bhabha believes that intermediaries or collaborators are necessary for the exercise of colonial authority in the structure of mimicry [11]. These intermediaries are from the colonized group and assist the colonizer in governing out of awe. This change of identity is evident in later part of the film when Tang Ning is framed for the murder of the Lin's and is about to flee. Tang Ning persuades Tang Zhen onto the car, tells her the truth of Madam Tang's dark conspiracy, and asks Tang Zhen to leave Taiwan with her. Tang Zhen goes silent for a while and then says that she has to make a phone call to her teacher to apply for a day's leave, fearing that Madam Tang would soon find out they are escaping. Tang Ning agrees, not knowing Tang Zhen is actually calling Madam Tang and informs Madam Tang that Tang Ning is kidnapping her. Under Madam Tang's intimidation, Tang Ning gives up on forcing Tang Zhen to come with her and instead boards an escape boat herself. On her way running back to Madam Tang, Tang Zhen witnesses the explosion that kills Tang Ning. In a clear demonstration, Tang Zhen, as the intermediary, assists in wielding the power of the colonizer to punish and kill the disobedient colonized, or the femme fatale. Besides the stereotype the colonizer, Madam Tang, has on Tang Ning, what Tang Zhen also mimics is her cold-heartedness which will later be exercised on the colonizer herself.

Huddart stated that mimicry is 'both resemblance and menace to the colonizer [12]. The ambivalent nature of colonial mimicry might make it the best possible way of defending colonial discourse, as it reflects the irresistible desire for the colonized to 'emerge as the authentic' through mimicry [11]. In the last scene of the film, Tang Zhen has taken over the family business from Madam Tang and has become a successful entrepreneur, while Madam Tang is critically ill and is barely being kept alive with medical equipment under Tang Zhen's command. Losing all other friends and families, Tang Zhen cannot let go of Madam Tang, the only one left for her to love. Madam Tang begs Tang Zhen for emancipation but is rejected by Tang Zhen in a gentle but irresistible manner, just like her old self. According to Bhabha, intermediaries would become too similar to the colonizer, thus compromising the original knowledge of superiority. The old intermediary between Madam Tang and Tang Ning has now undermined Madam Tang's authority through mimicry. The old identity of

Madam Tang as the colonizer has slipped away and is subverted by the effects of Tang Zhen's repetition. At this point, she has broken the colonial discourse that Madam Tang once fixed on her and Tang Ning. It can be said that Tang Zhen breaks the old colonial authority, but sadly, she is the new colonizer who exercises power over Madam Tang.

4. Conclusion

This study investigated postcolonialism in *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful*, identified the personified colonial relationship from the character relationships, and discovered that Madam Tang, as the matriarch of the Tang family, takes the position of a colonizer, while her two daughters are the colonized. Despite the fact of being colonized, the two daughters play different roles in this colonial relationship. The interaction between Madam Tang and Tang Ning displays a personified colonial discourse of stereotype, with Madam Tang intensifies her control by imposing a fixed stereotype on Tang Ning. The character relationship of Tang Zhen demonstrates that of mimicry, with Tang Zhen plays a dual role of being both the controlled of Madam Tang and the intermediary controller of Tang Ning.

The present study lays the groundwork for future systematic research into postcolonialism in *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful*, or further into the filmic manifestations of colonial relationships like metaphor or personification. The findings of this study have a number of implications for future studies involve postcolonialism studies and Asian film studies. The scope of this study was limited in terms of the possible effect of traditional Confucian family culture in the making of the character relationship, requiring continued efforts in further researches.

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