# Crack and Complicity – Bai Xianyong's *The Last Night of Madam Jin* Text and Film Adapting the Feminist Paradigm of Existence in a Double Space

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**Abstract:** The group image of females in the entertainment world constructed by Bai Xianyong is an important part of the contemporary Chinese female literature. Characterized by gender manifestation, objectification and psychological reflection, it mainly studies the destiny of females in the entertainment scene world in the change of time and space. It makes multi-angle polishing on the distorted discourse of females under the pressure of materialism and females' subjective understanding of self-identity. This not only brings the study of the image of females in the entertainment world, which is different from the traditional one in recent times, into a new feminist value category, but also provides a more three-dimensional space to explore the gender identity of this group under multiple perspectives. Apart from that, a more three-dimensional space is offered to explore the gender identity of this group in multiple perspectives. With the maturity of film adaptation, the female characters in the entertainment world, represented by "Madam Jin", have both textual and cinematic critical perspectives, which jointly enrich the context of Oriental females' studies and break the stereotyped, single impression of these females in mainstream culture. However, there are also inevitable cracks in the discourse.

**Keywords:** Bai Xianyong; *The Last Night of Madam Jin*; Women's Literature; Film Adaptation.

## 1. Introduction

Since the contemporary era, Taiwan's historical composition has made it pay early attention to the importance and writing of individual destinies, especially females' destinies and their voices, in the literature and film. With the continuous influx of diverse film theories and techniques after the 1980s, Taiwan's film industry has experienced an unprecedented boom, and the channels from literature to film adaptation and the shift of perspective have been gradually widened. The multi-part co-presentation has given space to subjects that originally existed in a narrow field. During this period, a lot of writers and directors had written and directed for females. Influenced by the three waves of Western feminist theories, females' perspectives are gradually opened up [1].

In the buffer zone of the transition of the times, some females in the commercialized city lost their voices in exchange for resources and survival with their beauty. However, the image of "females in the entertainment world" written by Bai Xianyong, to a certain extent, filled the gap of this group in Chinese literature in the second half of the 20th century. With a new approach, technique, spirit of times and focus, it follows the writing of the females of the entertainment world in *The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* [2]. Compared with *The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*, the females in the entertainment world have been given a brand-new look. Females in works such as *The Never Fading Yin Xueyan, The Last Night of Madam Jin, Jade Love,* and *Sweet Dream in the Garden* have a strong sense of self-survival. Although they are often held hostage by fate, they have a relatively clear pursuit

of freedom and individual value, and money. Apart from satisfying subjective materialistic desires, they tend to have desire of resistance and deconstruction of the society dominated by male discourse, which is elaborated in Chen Duo's A Study of the Image of Females in the Entertainment World under Bai Xianyong. It can be said that this group of females represented by "Madam Jin" in Bai Xianyong's works has left the traditional stereotypical model of instrumental attributes and transitioned from the "other" to the subject. Due to the responsibility of projecting the reflection of the times, Madam Jin et al are quite three-dimensional and real. Meanwhile, their images are rich and complex, thereby providing an open and broad space for the study of feminist literature.

In *The Last Night of Madam Jin*, Madam Jin has the versatility and exquisiteness expected of a female who has reigned in Taipei's magnificent nightclubs for many years. Besides, her sense of female independence is also greatly manifested, as she believes that females should stand on their own feet, and the first thing is not to take men as the only means of survival. The film adaptation and the original not only make extensive use of stream-of-consciousness techniques, but also combine the flow of the years, the swaying emotions of the females themselves, and the sultry music and lighting of the sound and color venues into one, which is natural and full of multiple layers of meaning. Notably, Bai Xianyong does not write from a compassionate perspective, but tries his best to fit in with the real height of the characters. From females of the entertainment world like Madam Jin, we can see that these images are subjective and dynamic. They are not just submissive and simply oppressed, waiting to be saved, but can be dedicated and sacrificed for their lovers, and become shrewd business females. This is a major breakthrough with the stereotypes of females in the entertainment world since classical times [3].

In terms of the available research results, apart from the iterative development of feminist theories in the Western context, there is still much room for feminist research on Bai Xianyong's images, but little is done to explore the analysis of female images and the existence of feminism in the space of film and television adapted from Bai Xianyong's novels. This has led to regrettable neglect of the results of Bai's approach to females' writing as men and the changes in the image of females in his film adaptations.

To fill this gap, this study takes feminist theory as the anchor point, focuses on the female image in *The Last Night of Madam Jin,* stars from the proposition of the similarities and differences in the portrayal of females in the dual space of text and film, and explores the feminist way of existence through the cracks between the two as well as the differences in the creation era, with a view to providing new insights and references for the transformation of Bai Xianyong's text to film and the multifaceted study of his female image.

## 2. The construction of female image against symbolic predestination in the dance floor

### 2.1 Dismantling the traditional image of women

At the heart of this distinction from the traditional Bai Xianyong style of women in the sex scene is the narrative violence of resistance to "symbolic" predestination in its many forms. Their most characteristic feature is that they are seen as individuals with rich emotions and desires, not just as moral degenerates, threats to venereal disease and public health, or "repulsive" special groups [4].

Mr. Bai Xianyong's Madam Jin, with her tight cheongsam of black gauze and gold silk, her hair slicked back in a large Taoist bun, her body bejeweled, her vulgarity intertwined with her nobility, represents the image of a group of dancers. They are piled up and raised by money and seemingly can only chase after it for the rest of their lives to survive; men are nothing more than implements for them to achieve their survival purposes. It doesn't matter if he is Chen Fa-rong, the boss Daban is about to marry, old man Pan Jin-rong, who has been very attentive to her before, or any other boss. For Madam Jin, marrying the old man is undoubtedly her "dowry". But she has passed forty, lost the capital to choose a man, thus self-deprecating "by your theory of the age of others?" At this point, the

collision between the open-mindedness of the new women and the not yet completely thawed traditional concept of women reached its peak.

Madam Jin undoubtedly has individuality and independent will; she dares to sneer at the child manager and is confident in her ability. She has a disdainful attitude towards most men, running for what she wants, but never bending the knee, letting men catch up with her. From the aspect of "self" and "independence", she has a modern feminist consciousness. But at the same time, behind her self-confidence lies an inferiority complex, one is her age - marrying someone now is "a long way to go for twenty more years"; the other is her status. Madam Jin is envious of her. This collision is the background of the new era, where life tends to be stable and affluent, and the mind is progressive and open but still bound by the ancient rule that women "should teach their children when they are of age".

The profession of dancer itself is destined to be very knowledgeable. The years of experience in surviving on her own and the shattered visions of naive love have raised Madam Jin's awareness, and she naturally does not regard men as the only straw in her life. But at the same time, older women, especially women like Madam Jin, are inevitably confused and worried, and age is always a heavy topic. To this day, there are probably still a few people who can face growing older openly and enjoy celibacy or a life full of themselves instead of revolving around their families. This image of Zhu Feng is the epitome of Jin Zhaoli in her youth, although she received love and help. Jin Zhaoli gave her a diamond ring so that she could live with her child. However, the end of a woman with no more survival skills after leaving the pleasure world inevitably falls into another miserable end. This fatalistic reincarnation is one of the sources of despair that makes Madam Jin exhausted [5].

On the other hand, the prostitute's descent into virtue is a very old narrative pattern in our narrative literature. In his early novel *The Last Night of Madam Jin*, Mr. Bai Xianyong applies this model, compressing the plot into a single night and exploring the meaning and limits of women's self-redemption with great seriousness, using the psychological activities of a prostitute as a vehicle.

### 2.2 Women's internal struggle

Under the domination of the male power discourse system, the tragic fate of women is caused by not only the historical factors of suffering, male power and its political symbols, but also the struggle among women. Therefore, Jin Zhaoli's backwardness in marrying someone must be compensated by the advantage of other things. As a whole, women should have a similar sense of belonging. Still, to compete for the approval of male discourse and to keep their vested interests, women are very careful with men, but they are unforgiving and guarded against their own kind. We see the continuation of jealousy between the two women of the past, without any indication of the individual's quest to show his or her unique life existence.

In the film: when the dancers fight for profit, and when the wife of the benefactor confronts Xiao Hongmei, Madam Jin shows a different approach from other women. The film shows her stopping the chaotic scenes and starkly speaks to the wretchedness of the dancers: fighting in the nest and hooking up with each other. "It's sad enough to be a dancer, but to kill each other, I really feel sorry for you." This is the time when Madam Jin's feminist light shines most vividly so far in the movie. "We are all unqualified," is her sad self-talk and cry. Whereas this fight scene is only passed over in the text by Bai Xianyong, the camera language is displayed for a considerable length of time. The director once again projects his interpretation of the songstress onto Madam Jin's different language and actions, and the phrase "it's poor enough to be a dancer" releases the signal of the director's individualistic expression. It is clear that there is a difference in expression between the text and the film, and the next section will focus on the comparison between the two.

## 3. Madam Jin under double space

Film has further developed a system of film narrative based on theories of literary narrative combined with film language and film semiotics. In literary studies, narrative dismantles and explores

the structure of a novel in layers from factors such as character, plot, time and space, and the novel's main idea. Film narrative analysis will also explore film so that the characters, plot, point of view, images, music, and even scene scheduling of film can become meaningful arrangements. Through the way of narrative, we can interpret the meaning of visualization of novels through the different presentation forms and expression channels of film and literature [6].

Bai Xianyong once said, "Women are the inexhaustible treasure I can't dig"[7]. Among his novels that have been adapted into films, most involve prostitutes, dancers, widows, homosexuals and other marginalized groups. In commercial films, these groups are often presented as a kind of gimmick to satisfy the public's desire for voyeurism and attract more attention, thus generating higher box office revenues and more capital. However, whether these sensitive issues can still reproduce the profound connotation of the original after being adapted into video form under the capital market and commercial trend is an urgent issue to be discussed today.

### 3.1 Similarities and differences in narrative techniques

The film *The Last Night of Madam Jin* has obvious differences in narrative strategies from the original. Director Bai Jingrui followed the advice of Bai Xianyong and followed the flashback technique of alternating the past and present of the original. However, the director also adjusted the layout of the narrative to a certain extent during the adaptation process. The novel is a stream-of-consciousness retracing of Madam Jin's career as a dancer: the first time is after she is angry with the manager of Tong Da, Madam Jin recalls a chance encounter with her former "rival", the lilac beauty Ren Daidai of Paramount Ballroom, at the cloth and silk house, while the former "rival" has The second time is when the confrontation between Madam Jin and Zhu Feng reminds Madam Jin of the abortion he had for his first love Yue Ru; the third time is when Madam Jin looks at the top dancer in Paris at night and remembers Wu Xikui, who was as popular as her in Shanghai; the fourth time is when Madam Jin sees a young man who looks like his first love Yue Ru at the end and thinks of dancing with Yue Ru.

Compared with the original text, the film has made additions and deletions to its content. For example, in the story structure of the film, the creative team filled in the story of Madam Jin's emotional journey with his two lovers, Yue Ru and Qin Xiong, while the original text chose to outline his emotional journey with fewer strokes, leaving more white space for the reader's imagination and exploration.

*The Last Night of Madam Jin* re-examines her decades-long career as a dancer through the psychological activities of the last night of her career as a dancer. In describing the precious and pure first love between Madam Jin and Yue Ru, Mr. Bai Xianyong adopts a "false" way of writing: "At that time, her heart was filled with gratitude and pity, having received the virginity of such a blushing man. For a moment, she felt that the humiliation and blasphemy she had suffered in other men, with her tears flowed away in general. She had always felt that men's bodies were dirty, ugly and smelly, and she had been in bed with many men, and each time she had turned her head away and closed her eyes tightly ... She seemed to see a naked male body for the first time, and at that moment she realized that a woman's flesh for a man, but also that crazy obsession up". The novel's content makes it difficult to find scenes in the film that can specifically express it.

The text of a novel can directly impact the reader's thoughts and emotions, dramatizing the plot in the inner life of the characters. On the other hand, film and television adaptations often require the re-creation of scenes, which must visualize the abstract and find an outlet for the protagonist's inner conflict. In the film *The Last Night of Madam Jin*, unlike the text, it lays out the details of Madam Jin and Yue Ru's emotional experience one by one, from their dreamy first encounter, the first night of Madam Jin and Yue Ru, to her being forced to have an abortion by Mum's mother with a funnel, the love experiences of Madam Jin and Yue Ru are linked one by one by the scenes in the film, but this adaptation of the original text is reduced to a dull description of their The audience cannot really "empathize" with the protagonist, but can only sympathize with him as a bystander. At the film's end, Madam Jin says directly to Qin Xiong, "For the first time, twenty years ago, I met a man who was so

shy, he was with me, and for the first time, I was moved to tears. The film and television that cannot break the phono-centrism still cannot restore the charm of the semantic proliferation of the novel.

### 3.2 Narrative rhythm between fiction and film

Compared with the novel, the time ratio between memory and reality is balanced, and the topics are set according to the degree of urgency. The film's memories occupy two-thirds of the space and adopt a slower narrative rhythm. The detailed descriptions of psychological activities evolve into fragmented reenactments of life, and the characters' behavior seems dull rather than natural toward the end. After writing at length about Madam Jin's first love affair with Yue Ru, the film adds more ink to the story of his love affair with Qin Xiong. In contrast to the original's preference for Yue Ru, the film makes the breakup scene between Madam Jin and Qin Xiong the most important scene. Still, due to the film's slightly drawn-out narrative pace in the early stages, the audience's enthusiasm is exhausted before the story's climax begins. Compared with the novel text, the film lacks the inner transformation of the plot progression, and the plot is pre-determined, resulting in a slightly stagnant rhythm, presenting a rough distortion of commercial aesthetics.

### 3.3 The male gaze in and out of the play

The film *The Last Night of Madam Jin* hollowed out the female subject's status, interspersed manystatus of the female subject, and interspersed many singing and dancing scenes. Laura Mulvey suggests that the singing and dancing girl technique allows the male gaze in the screen story and the audience's gaze to be subtly combined without destroying the story's realism. "The female body image, cut for the close-up, becomes the object of aesthetic or desire viewing."

Two masters, Bai Xianyong and Cao Ruiyuan, also argued over the bed scene. Bai Xianyong thought that the bed scene between Madam Jin and Ouyang Long was not filmed beautifully enough and should be deleted. But Bai Jingrui thought that women's ketone bodies were what male viewers loved to watch, and the topic was full [8]. Jiao Xiongping once criticized the male point of view behind a large number of independent female films at that time, and the portrayal and depiction of sexual desire was considered to be "filling the voyeuristic mentality of men, which evolved into debauchery or indulgence under improper treatment" [9].As feminist theorist Laura Mulvey points out, the female figure in film has always been the focus of the male gaze, with female appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact, and women shown as objects of sexual desire being the dominant motive for the erotic spectacle"[10].

## 4. Summary

In essence, *The Last Night of Madam Jin* is still about a female's "homecoming" story. Under the gaze of two male creators, the way for a modern-minded dancer to be saved is still dependent on a man. The novel not only presents the ill-fated fate of a modern-minded dancer, but also deconstructs the traditional representations of the role of the dancer in a specific discourse. The groundbreaking aspect of Bai Xianyong's work lies in that in the vast body of females' literature, the image and meaning of females are mostly set in relation to the male subject, and two basic types are always present: the femme fatale and the angelic girl. [11] Bai Xianyong gives his dancers a serpentine beauty with innocence and chivalry. On this basis, the film director Bai Jingrui adds his personal characteristics of the times and individual imagination. However, no matter how abundant, females, after all, must be that beautiful gender.

So far, almost all the recorded human civilizations have been created under a patriarchal system. When people look at the sky, they may even forget that the color of the iron window is patriarchy and think that it is the original color of the sky.

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