

# Self-bondage, Quest for Knowledge and Redemption: An Interpretation of the Female Image in *The Flowers of Gold*

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**Abstract:** *The Flowers of War*, directed by Zhang Yimou and adapted from Yan Geling's novel, has aroused strong reactions both at home and abroad since its release. With a unique female perspective, the film tells the tragic story of 13 prostitutes who go to a Japanese banquet in a church in order to save the schoolgirls who are about to be captured by the Japanese army. Different from other war films, *The Flowers of War* focuses on women. This study deeply interprets the female group images in the film and analyzes from three dimensions: gender identity oppression, seeking knowledge of female images, and female self-redemption, aiming to reveal the oppression and discrimination suffered by women compared with men in the war years, and at the same time reflect on the powerful power displayed by women today, so as to promote the society's re-examination of female images. It is expected that this will trigger more thinking about female identity in the academic community and open up new ideas for exploring gender equality.

**Keywords:** Female Image; Oppression; *The Flowers of War*.

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## 1. Introduction

*The Flowers of War*, directed by Zhang Yimou, was released in cinemas at home and abroad in late 2011. It was adapted from Yan Geling's novel of the same name and took three years to complete. Focusing on the real historical battle of the Nanjing Massacre, the film is a powerful war drama.

The story takes place in the church of Refuge, is three prostitutes and a group of female church students because of different origins leading to constant conflict, but when the Japanese soldiers asked female students to go to the dinner and sing, the group of prostitutes came forward, disguised instead of female students to go to the appointment of the Japanese officer's death. Zhang Yimou abandoned the grand perspective of the war in this film, focusing his eyes on the female group, highlighting the ongoing suffering of women under the violence, and showing vividly that women in the war will not only be threatened with their lives, but also suffer more oppression due to gender.

This group of prostitutes, which is discriminated against by the public as dirty, can reveal the bitterness and difficulty of women being placed under the patriarchal culture from the perspective of art to a certain extent, and it can emerge more clearly with the cruel war as the background.

## 2. The Self-restraint and Oppression of Female Identity

In the backdrop of war, the courtesans and the female students from the church did not stand in solidarity as fellow women. Instead, owing to their respective identities, there emerged profound internal schisms and acrimonious confrontations. In the film, the church, serving as the pivotal narrative space, harbors an implicit yet intricate power structure among women within its spatial configuration. The attic where the female students seek refuge and the basement where the prostitutes temporarily sojourn, to a certain degree, also constitute a distinctive divine spatial order characteristic

of Christian architecture.

This vertically stratified spatial arrangement is, in essence, a tangible manifestation of the gender regulation in a patriarchal society. The attic, as a hallowed space adjacent to the dome, alludes to the spiritual immaculateness of the female student cohort, who are regarded as the "brides of Christ." Conversely, the basement, as a mundane space at the edifice's foundation, metaphorically epitomizes the prostitutes' identity as the "descendants of Eve," burdened with the original sin of the flesh. This spatial encoding not only replicates the hierarchical divisions in real society but also mirrors the contemporary society's symbolic subjugation of the female body.

Likewise, this spatial disparity also symbolizes the vast chasm in social status engendered by divergent identities, insinuating the dichotomy between the "noble" and the "vile." In the film, the female students are uniformly attired in identical school uniforms and sport neat shoulder-length bobs, while the prostitutes are adorned in flamboyant and diverse finery. This, to some extent, also serves as an allegory for the lack of freedom of female identities in society. Only the image sanctioned by society can be deemed "noble" and "chaste." Once a woman deviates from this preconceived mold, even if there is no inherent impropriety, she will be stigmatized as "vile" in the public eye.

In the perception of the female students, the "Thirteen Hairpins," this coterie of courtesans, are antithetical to purity and are objects of societal opprobrium. Meanwhile, they, as women, are esteemed as paragons of "purity." They persistently underscore their dissimilarity from the prostitutes, yet simultaneously, they are intrigued by this group of women of ill repute. Ever since the prostitutes entered the church, the female students have betrayed their curiosity in their discourse, referring to them as the "enigmatic women of the Qinhuai River." This contradiction is manifested in their fascination with the prostitutes' physicality, as they discern the latent potentialities of their own bodies in the latter. However, the female students would never countenance such

potentialities materializing within themselves; they are determined to uphold their so-called chaste facade.

From the female students, one can discern the self-definition and self-imposed constraints that women place upon themselves. From start to finish, they are ensnared within the circumscribed female archetype and bereft of vitality. They are seized by a dread of awakening the sensibilities of their bodies and are consumed by a sense of shame regarding their female corporeality, which is the paradoxical consciousness of "the dissociation of spirit and flesh" depicted in the film. They harbor animosity towards their fellow female counterparts yet surreptitiously engage in discussions about their appearance and physique. The women of the Qinhuai River have become the focal points of their libidinal projections. With their minds shackled and their innate natures repressed, the female students have become timorous and ineffectual both in terms of their age and conduct, foreshadowing their subsequent feebleness in the face of adversity.

### **3. The Thirst for Knowledge of Female Groups**

In the film, the character Yumu dismantled the traditional stereotype of prostitutes, carrying the disruptive power of Foucault's so-called "knowledge-power" relationship. This portrayal was impressive. In that era, society harbored malicious intentions towards women and their living conditions were extremely difficult. However, in the church, Yumu, as a prostitute, could communicate fluently with John in English. This contrast naturally showcased the beauty of knowledge bestowed upon women. From the climax of the film, when the female students were faced with the desperate situation of attending a Japanese officer's banquet and attempted suicide, Yumu could disregard the discrimination they had once held towards her and resolutely propose to replace them and go instead. She could also use the knowledge-based reasoning of "The concubine who doesn't know the hatred of the country doesn't know the sorrow of the fallen kingdom, and still sings the 'Nanjing Road' song across the river" to comfort and persuade the other sisters. The classical derogatory meaning of "The concubine who doesn't know the hatred of the country" was re-encoded as a spiritual declaration of self-sacrifice by the lower-class group, and the moral teachings of traditional literati were subjected to a complete semantic reversal. Moreover, it was more creatively integrated with the tune of "Jasmine Flower", achieving a new meaning symbiosis between literary classics and folk ballads on the female body. In this context, the extraordinary insight and calm handling of affairs demonstrated the thoroughness of the noble spirit of knowledge bestowed upon women.

In the film, the display of knowledge was not limited to the so-called pure and knowledgeable female students. Instead, it focused on depicting Yumu, who broke the old-fashioned stereotypes of women imposed by society through her own knowledge cultivation. The knowledge of prostitutes, who were at the bottom of society and despised by others, became a solid support for the thirteen heroines to save the female students. "The Thirteen Heroines of Jinling" shouted through the mouths of women the demand for equality before knowledge, which was a powerful response to social injustice and also the most sincere and solid cry of women in that era, reflecting their respect and pursuit of knowledge.

### **4. Self-redemption of Female Image**

The film also focuses on Cardamom's feelings for Urzen. Cardamom sings "The Scene of Qin Huai" on the pipa to express her longing for Pu Sheng's feelings, and eventually falls into the hands of the Japanese army in order to get the pipa strings. Some people think that her death for this is blasphemy of life, but when Pu Sheng was dying, she let Pu Sheng marry herself. For her, this string is the redemption of her own soul, and also represents the redemption of women's own feelings, carrying women's expectations for love, highlighting women's strong strength to redeem themselves.

Similarly, the classic scenes in "Thirteen Flowers of Jinling" are undoubtedly the scenes where the Thirteen Flowers stand up to save the female students, and the prostitutes persuade the female students not to give up their lives, and are willing to take their place. As a vulnerable group, she shows strong faith. In a life-or-death choice, they choose to save themselves to protect the weaker female students. In the face of the secular contempt and abuse, they did not suffer silently, but stood up when the danger came and met death with pride. In this way, the male power that should protect women appears weak and pitiful. The film takes this opportunity to weaken the male power and highlight the female ability. The sacrifice of the prostitutes is a self-redemption that transcends the body. For itself, it is the redemption of the status of women; For society, it is the salvation of the world.

### **5. The Powerful Force of Female Ensemble Portrayals**

In the film, Zhang Yimou abandons the traditional narrative mode of individual heroes and instead employs highly condensed and emotionally stirring group imagery to reconstruct the dimension of war epics. The thirteen women from the Qinhuai River, with their highly charged ensemble portrayal, form a rare awakening female spectrum in war narratives. From their first appearance, graceful and alluring, to later on the rooftop, where they comfort the church girl student who is determined to die, they remain a closely-knit whole throughout. Under this collective ensemble, the power of women becomes even stronger. This construction of group spirit presents a dual dialectical relationship. On one hand, the women from the Qinhuai River and the church girl students form a mirror-like structure of mutual otherness. The women from the Qinhuai River, living at the bottom of the secular society and labeled with numerous moral judgments, are seen as morally flawed; while the church girl students, nurtured by knowledge and residing in a relatively pure spiritual world, with the moral fastidiousness typical of the intellectual class, contrast sharply with the women from the Qinhuai River. On the other hand, the group of women from the Qinhuai River demonstrates an astonishing value homogeneity. This is the value force that enables these women, who are despised by the secular world, to unite and protect another vulnerable group of the same nature when danger strikes. When they collectively tear off their makeup, the broken rouge becomes a ritual symbol to break the objectified identity; when they transform their cheongsams into battle robes, the hidden daggers in the folds of the silk complete the semantic shift from erotic symbols to resistance symbols.

Even today, the values of the collective image still hold a warm and powerful position in the hearts of Chinese people. The women of Qinhuai River and the female students in the

church are part of a complete female collective image, but they belong to two different groups respectively. Therefore, their expectations for what they desire are completely different, and the power they display is also completely different. In the end of the film, the scene where the female students come forward to accuse the Japanese of their crimes is also the rise of the female power contained in the collective image. These educated women who were once trained as "symbols of weakness" have completed their spiritual growth under the nourishment of collective memory. What they accuse in English is not only the war crimes but also a breakthrough from essentialism of gender. In the collective image, the representatives of weakness in the secular world can also become heroic power to save the secular world. This is a powerful interpretation of the female group in the film.

The prostitute group in "Thirteen Heroines of Jinling" is undoubtedly touching. They are the heroes of this collective and also the heroes of this female collective image.

## 6. Epilogue

"13 Flowers of War" is an excellent film and television work with great depth and rich connotation. Director Zhang Yimou shuns the usual perspective and chooses to tell it from the perspective of a prostitute from the bottom of society, which makes this adaptation very unique. In the film, every line and every character is carefully crafted, without any redundancy, to contribute to the film's theme.

The most powerful thing about this war drama is that it shows the powerful side of women and their deep tenderness towards emotions. The film deeply exposes the double suffering of women in the war: as human beings, oppressed and trampled on; And as women, their dignity is ruthlessly deprived. Compared with the direct depiction of war scenes, the work spends more on depicting the decline of women's

status in a patriarchal society, and gender oppression is more naked in the context of war. No matter what class of society women are in, it is difficult to escape the oppression brought by gender. The war will end eventually, but the harm and mental torture women have suffered will remain for a long time, and will be aggravated by people's inherent prejudice, which has become an insurmountable gap in front of women.

The film's interpretation of women is thought-provoking. Women's dedication and their desire for knowledge constitute the unique charm of women's group images. This kind of female power is not only of great significance in the war era, but also in today's society. The awakening of female consciousness is an inevitable trend of historical development. Through this film, we should re-examine and change the inherent cognition of women, so as to actively explore more possibilities to achieve gender equality in real life.

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