



Damsel in Distress and Confucianism in the film ENTITLED *Hooked on You*

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Abstract

*The research aims at showing that even a light romantic comedy film like a 2007 Hong Kong film entitled *Hooked on You* (每當變幻時) is found to have broken the damsel in distress convention normally used in romantic comedy films. The disregarding of the convention is depicted through the practice of Confucianism, as implicitly portrayed through the main characters in the film.*

This research focuses on the female protagonist of the film whose name is Miu. She is said to be a leftover woman or sheng nü because of her being single despite being 30s. Throughout the film, she endeavors trying to find her 'prince' to complete her Yang element, which is owned by men. Confucianism teaches that women possess Yin elements and they need men to complete her Yang elements so that there will be a balance of Yin-Yang in line with the Confucianism cosmology.

The research applies the teachings of Confucianism specifically in relation to men and women and the damsel in distress along with Charles Sanders Peirce's division of signs consisting of icons, indexes and symbols to analyse the necessary scenes.

*The research finds out that Miu chooses not to follow the damsel in distress convention and not complete her Yang elements in accordance with Confucianism. The female protagonist decides to be single and let her Yang element remain incomplete at the end of the film. This is rare in a romantic comedy Hong Kong film and makes the female protagonist and the film *Hooked on You* worth analysing.*

Keywords: Damsel in distress, Yin-Yang and sheng nü, The leftover woman

A. Introduction

Damsel in distress is a phrase used to refer to the common conventional rule of a romantic comedy film. That is, a woman who is seeking to be saved by a 'prince' in order to gain happiness in her life. In the film industry, the phrase is used to refer to the convention that there is an anxious woman who needs to be saved by 'a man-prince' in order to lead a happy life. This formula has been used constantly in movies. "Men are painted to be independent while women are rendered dependent on men; men are depicted as heroic saviors and women as damsels in distress" (Johnson 2005: 200). A classic example is the film *Cinderella*, which has been remade

in different versions in the form of cartoon and live action movie, the latest version of which was directed by Kenneth Branagh.

The depiction relates to the adoption of the patriarchal system. It has become the mindset especially those living in a patriarchal system to put men as superior than women. The patriarchal system is predominantly applied in Chinese culture and strongly influenced by Confucianism. In the Analects, Confucianism teaches that a woman must obey her husband when she has got married, whereas an unmarried woman must obey her father's words due to the fact that women possess Yin elements and men own Yang elements (Confucius 1999). Thus, to complete a woman's life, the presence of a man is necessary.

The practice of Confucianism is present in the film *Hooked on You*. On the surface, the film is no different from the other romantic comedy films. It presents a 'leftover' woman, a term used by the Chinese to refer to an unmarried woman whose age has exceeded the age of marriage. Throughout the film, she is matched by different men by his father in order for her Yang elements to be completed and live in harmony. The film also presents the formula of damsel in distress because the female protagonist is 'saved' twice by the allegedly prince of her life.

Particularly, the film *Hooked on You* (每當變幻時) is a 2007 Hong Kong film produced by Johnnie To Kei Fung, directed by Law Wing Cheong, written by Fung Chih Chiang and starred Miriam Yeung Chin Wah, Eason Chan Yik Shun and Stanley Fung Shui Fan among others. The film revolves around a character named Miu, who in the course of the film, is seeking for her true love since she has already been too late to get married. She befriends a fishmonger who is referred to as the Fisherman in the film. They are involved in a love and hate relationship in the course of the film despite her father's disagreement of their relationship. It is interesting to find out whether she eventually ends up with the Fisherman, which is a cliché in a romantic comedy or not.

Thus, the question that I would like to pose for this research is whether the particular film follows the common convention of a rom-com film in which the female character finds her true prince. It is also equally interesting to find out whether the film simply ends up presenting another female character who is another embodiment of a Confucianist woman that succumbs to the teachings of *Yin-Yang* or there will be a breakthrough in terms of the convention and the practice of Confucianism.

B. Theoretical Framework

1. The Convention of Damsel in Distress

In a film analysis, a convention means “the established way of doing something, or understanding something, or presenting something” (De Reeper 2016). It is a generally accepted norm that is so embedded in a culture that we are not aware of them.

In a film, a convention is used to represent certain topics, characters and events or even more. The convention is utilized to shape the way we think about a character or an event. One of the stereotypes found in movies is damsel in distress. It is the convention which emphasizes the portrayal of women as being helpless, frail, and desperate to be protected by the men (De Reeper 2016).

2. Men and Women in Confucianism

As far as the property of *Yin* and *Yang* is concerned, all things in the cosmos are non-single items as they always have the opposites which can be separated by the property of *Yin* and *Yang*:

A <i>Yang</i>	B <i>Yin</i>
1. Heaven	Earth
2. Spring	Autumn
3. Summer	Winter
4. Day	Night
...	
9. Ruler	Minister
10. Above	Below
11. Man	Woman

(Graham 1986:27-28)

Therefore, *Yin* represents the characters of women, whereas *Yang* represents the character of men. With regards to the relationship of men and women, women are supposed to be passive, suffering and weak. However, despite the fact that *Yin* and *Yang* cannot always rigidly be defined as “female” and “male” since either can be said to have *Yin* and *Yang* based on the given context. However, a Confucian thinker named Dong Zhongshu (195-115 B.C.E) states that the formal cosmology is based on *Yin-Yang*, which is of great influence in the Chinese tradition. (Wang 2012). He understands “men as *Yang* and women as *Yin* in a certain context and men are dominant, powerful and moral and therefore belong to *Yang*, whereas women are precisely the opposite-subservient, weak, selfish and jealous – and best described as *Yin*” (Wang 2012).

Thus, Confucianism teaches that women are prone to have the characteristics of *Yin*, whereas men are more of *Yang*. In order to balance it, a woman must unite with a man. A woman must obey her parents and be filial to her father when he is alive. After getting married, a woman must obey her husbands. Her obedience will mean her *Yin-Yang* elements being completed and the woman has achieved perfection as a woman.

3. A leftover woman/ shengnu 剩女

The term *shengnu* 剩女 or a leftover woman refers to “women in the age of 20s or early 30s who has a successful career but owns the status of being unmarried” (To 2013). The existence of many leftover women is due to the fact that in the modern era women are encouraged to have achievements economically, which takes time to achieve and as a result many of them remain single. “The conflicts between the traditional views of the women's

parents and the modern views to support women's economic achievement have led to the perpetuation of the number of *sheng nü*, especially in urban area” (To 2013).

Therefore, these left over women sometimes end up being matched to find their mate. “Chinese parents have traditionally sought to arrange matches for daughters that raise their status, and/or to find a mate of similar background, referred to as *mendang hudui* 門當戶對 or literally " matching doors " (To 2013).

4. Charles Sanders Pierce’s Linguistic Signs

Charles Sanders Pierce’s linguistic sign comprises of three elements (Johansen 2002:51):

1. An icon is a linguistic sign that resembles the real object. The sign of a dog  is the icon of the real dog.
2. An index is a linguistic sign that deals with the material or causal relationship or indication or implication. Thus, the presence of smoke is the index or indication of fire.  is an index of .
3. A symbol is a linguistic sign whose meaning has to be learned since it relates to conventions or norms or even cultures. The  *Yin-Yang* cosmology, which is one of the centers of this research, sets an ideal example for Pierce’s symbol since it takes learning to understand what it actually means.

C. Result and Discussion

Miu



Miu’s Practice of Confucianism

Miu (fig.1), starred by Miriam Yeung Chin Wah, is a leftover woman who is seeking for a husband in her life. She opens up a fish stall in the Fortune Market. She runs the business together with her father. Her father is equally concerned with her unmarried status or being a *sheng nu*. Miu is a representation of a *Yin* element. Her closeness and filial piety that she practices to her father completes her *Yang* element. Her father is completely aware that he will not live longer and that Miu needs to have his replacement so as to live in harmony.

Fig.1.Miu, the female protagonist (2007)



Fig.2. The Fisherman (on the left) and Miu (on the right) (2007)



Fig.3. The fish and the packed fish (2007)

Miu grows love and hate simultaneously with the Fisherman, played by Eason Chan Yik Shun (fig.2). Miu’s father, played by Stanley Fung Shui Fan, disagrees with her choice. His disagreement is shown in terms of semiotics (fig.3) on the occasion of Miu’s having to choose between a dead fish and a fish meat. The fish, in terms of icon, represents the Fisherman’s fish and the packed fish meat represents hers. In terms of index, marrying a fisherman does not indicate a promising and brighter future for Miu. Symbolically, her *Yang* element is not thoroughly completed since the Fisherman is not an ideal example of *Yang* due to his being economically insufficient.



Fig. 4. Miu (on the left) and her father (on the right) (2007)



Fig.5. Miu’s 1st matched man (2007)

Her father’s disagreement (fig. 4) is shown when he throws the dead fish away. Mium, being a faithful daughter to her father, tries to complete her *Yang* and agrees to be matched with two different men, whom his father considers to be ideal for her. However, they both are not meant for her as one of them is a workaholic (fig.5) and the other one is a momma’s boy (fig. 6).

Miu fails to complete her *Yang* and plunges into deep devastation (fig.7) to learn her father’s of blood cancer (fig.8). Her father’s death is completely devastating for her since she feels as if she has lost half of herself, her *Yang* character.

Miu’s Being a ‘Damsel in Distress’

Miu attempts to commit suicide by jumping from the rooftop of the Fortune Market. However, she was blocked by the Fisherman. The Fisherman manages to save Miu from her distress on account of losing his father and becomes her ‘prince’ in the scene (fig.9).



Fig.6. Miu’s 2nd matched man (2007)



Fig.7. Miu’s devastation (2007)



Fig.8. Miu's deceased father (2007)



Fig.9. Miu's attempt to commit suicide prevented by her 'prince'



Fig.10. Miu's starting a career as a make-up artist

Miu's failure to complete her *Yang* leads her to pursue another career as a make-up artist in the central city of Hong Kong and temporarily stops looking for her 'prince' (fig.10).



Fig.11. Miu's car crash

Miu's return to her hometown is met by her accident on a car due to her being sleepy. (fig.11) Her 'prince', the Fisherman saves her one more time (fig.12). She is completely overjoyed to get the chance to meet him after sometime (fig.13).



Fig.12. Miu's being saved by her 'prince'



Fig.13. Miu's being overjoyed meeting her 'prince'

Miu's prince turns out to have been married to an immigrant Chinese woman seeking for citizenship and have a daughter (fig.14). She is completely surprised to be aware of this particular fact.



Fig.14. The fisherman and his daughter (on the left) along with his wife (on the right) (2007)

Miu's Personal Choice of Fate



Fig.15. Miu's choice to be single (2007)

Miriam makes up her mind not to complete her *Yang* and let her *Yin* be incomplete. She opens her own make-up store and names it 'SINGLE' (fig.15), which symbolically represents her status and disobedience to the *Yin-Yang* teaching in Confucianism. She decides to embrace modernity instead of succumbing to Confucianism. She refuses to be another damsel in distress and live independently as a successful single woman or a *shengnu*.

D. Conclusion

In conclusion, I find Miu's depiction of a leftover woman in *Hooked on You* to be a rare case. It is because in Hong Kong films, the representation of a female character, particularly in a romantic comedy movie, normally ends up with the female character being married or having a boyfriend, to say the least. Such a choice is very common since Hong Kong is patriarchal and portrays a male character as being a 'needed' figure for the female character, as a part of the Confucianism practice. The film's choice to make the character still become a leftover woman or *shengnu* despite the bad image is worth complimenting and makes the film worth analyzing. This means that the film dares to challenge Confucianism's *Yin-Yang* cosmology. The same is also true of following the damsel in distress convention. The convention is purposefully not followed despite the formula's having been proven to be favored in a romantic comedy, which suggests that the film is one of a kind regardless of its being a light rom-com.

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