

# Patricide Allegory in Palace Intrigues—A Critique of *Shadow* From the Cultural and Gendered Perspective

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This paper examines the filming practice of Zhang Yimou's *Shadow* (2018) in the context of Chinese culture and from the perspectives of contemporary gender theories. It argues that *Shadow* constructs a male-dominated patriarchal culture and a patricide allegory of the Father and Son structure of power in palace intrigues. Furthermore, it is a history of the acts that the Son takes to get the Father's woman, absolve the tyrannical Father's threat of castration and attain the supreme power. To suit the motif of palace intrigues, Zhang adopts quasi-back-and-white palette to create stunning visuals like traditional Chinese ink paintings. He also constructs a web-narrative of dualities around the yin-yang paradigm, the taichi diagram in particular. The film's central gender relationship is a triangular one, in which Woman is positioned between the Father/the master and the Son/his "shadow". Woman is marginalized in the film. She is not represented as the central subject, but as the object of sacrifice who functions to satisfy male desire and construct male subjectivity and sexuality. Moreover, the film explores how toxic and violent Chinese masculinity can become when it deviates from *wen-wu* prowess. Thus, *Shadow* becomes a violent movie that intensifies the viewer's experience of violence as the Son/ the "shadow" must be absolutely brutal and ruthless in order to slay the Father/ the master and create new order.

*Keywords:* *Shadow*, palace intrigues, the Father, the Son, yin-yang paradigm

## Introduction

Zhang Yimou's *Shadow* is an important film in the history of Chinese cinema which has attracted large audiences and critics in and outside of China. The positive reviews on douban.com were just 72%, but those on metacritic.com and rottentomatoes.com were up to 83% and 94% respectively<sup>1</sup>. Glenn Kenny from *The New York Times* highly acclaimed *Shadow* as "a martial-arts movie landmark, as strong in its performances as it is spectacularly novel in its violence" (Kenny, 2019). Adapted from Zhu Sujin's historical novel *Three Kingdoms* (2010), *Shadow* does not intend to be historically authentic. On the contrary, it fabricates stylized Orientalist mise-en-scène and reimagines its characters to construct a "film noire". Set in AD 220-280, *Shadow* is a period film in ancient China. It is a web-narrative of intertwined plot and subplots centring on complicated intrigues conceived by three men—King Pei, Commander Zi Yu, and his "shadow". King Pei gets furious when hearing that Commander Zi Yu will engage in a duel with Yan Kingdom's general Yang Cang for Pei Kingdom's lost city. To keep the peace and the alliance, King Pei, despite General Tianzhan's strong opposition, deposes

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<sup>1</sup> Douban, rottentomatoes, and metacritic are established websites aggregating reviews of media products. Douban is a Chinese website, whereas rottentomatoes and metacritic are American websites. The data used in this paper were accessed June 25, 2020.

Commander Zi Yu and accepts Lu Yan's proposal of offering Princess Qingping to Yang Cang's son Yang Ping as a concubine. But in fact, the Commander whom King Pei sees is not Zi Yu but Jingzhou—a man whom Zi Yu has been using as his “shadow” for many years with his wife Madam Xiaoai's help.

### **Visuals Like Traditional Chinese Ink-Brush Painting—A New Film Form**

To suit the motif of palace intrigues, Zhang Yimou experiments with a quasi-black-and-white palette to create stunning visuals that look like traditional Chinese ink paintings. As David Chute argues, “For all his pictorial prowess, Zhang Yimou is not a cinematographer director in the sense of settling for pretty pictures—he's a storyteller who uses colour and light, and even set dressing, expressively” (Chute, 1998). But paradoxically, as a colourist master, Zhang almost abjures the use of colours in filming *Shadow*. On the contrary, he orchestrates a quasi-black-and-white palette to achieve a grand visual opera in a solemn setting. And the strong appeal of the film's photography rests with its near monochromatic colour scheme, muted mise-en-scène and incessant rains from start to finish.

Specifically, Zhang creates a new film form that aptly fits a story rife with dark intrigues through privileging “the nearly black-and-white visuals occasionally streaked red with blood” (van Hoeij, 2018). The title “影” (shadow) is a black calligraphic character whose credit is done in the style of splashing ink. The characters wear either black armour or black, white or grey robes with or without patterns of hand-painted ink drawings. King Pei's court features some translucent frames of Chinese screens with ink-painted human figures and a great number of bolts of calligraphy written in black cursive characters. Commander Zi Yu's residence features a labyrinthine network of dark cells and a lot of translucent Chinese screens with ink-painted human figures, magnolias or plum blossoms. The indoor scenes render stunningly monochromatic grey visuals with a multitude of shadows and shades, as they are often shot in low key lighting, and sometimes through translucent Chinese screens. The misty Chinese landscape features grey palaces, waters, mountains, and sky. Therefore, “in scenes where the mountains loom in the rain, it is like looking at a Chinese ink painting come to life” (Chan, 2018). Moreover, though the tones of skin, bamboo, flicker light of the candle are dim and sparse, the red blood is very striking as it would break forth against the black-and-white backdrop when the characters are stabbed. This is a shocking reminder of how trivial and insignificant one's life can be when he or she gets involved in bloody palace intrigues. To triumph over palace intrigues means ruthless bloodshed in the grey world. Thus, *Shadow's* cinematography renders it emotionally expressive—dark, sombre, and bleak.

### **Yin-Yang Paradigm—A Web-Narrative of Dualities**

To suit the motif of palace intrigues, Zhang also constructs a web-narrative of dualities around the yin-yang paradigm. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom have discussed gender codes and subjectivities regarding Taoism and Confucianism's different approaches to the yin-yang paradigm. According to Chinese cosmology, the universe creates itself out of a primary chaos of material energy, organized into the cycles of yin and yang and formed into objects and living beings. Yin is commonly characterized as an inward energy that is feminine, still, dark, and negative, and yang as an outward energy, masculine, hot, bright, and positive. Taoism values yin as much as yang, viewing yin and yang interchangeable and yin-yang balance a prerequisite for the wholeness of the cosmic order. By contrast, orthodox Confucianism, the dominant ideology of pre-modern China, privileges yang and debases yin. Yin and yang in Confucian orthodoxy refer to hierarchical human relationships, and a wife is seen as inferior to her husband, as yin is to yang (Brownell & Wasserstrom,

2002, p. 28). Likewise, Yuejin Wang notes that Confucianism has valued yang more than yin and implemented “the noble male and base female” as a moral code to be carried over from family to society<sup>2</sup> (Wang, 1991, p. 82). Brownell, Wassertrom, and Wang agree that Confucian ideologies regarding the yin-yang paradigm and morality have largely been responsible for the conceptualization of women’s subordination and inferiority in Chinese history. Furthermore, the hierarchal social order in pre-modern China sought to structure itself around the figure of gender, with the ruler as the dominant male and the ruled as the submissive female, no matter whether they were of different sexes or same sex (Wang, 1991, p. 82). Arguably, *Shadow* prioritizes the yin-yang paradigm when constructing connections between any two things or people.

The film abounds in signs and signals constructed around the yin-yang paradigm. “Visually and thematically, *Shadow* is a web of dualities—black and white, woman and man possibly the most explicit—where success in battle is contingent on the harmony between the two opposing sides” (Goi, 2018). More specifically, the two opposing kingdoms are “沛” and “炎”—the radical “氵” of character “沛” connotes water, which is yin, whereas the radical “火” of character “炎” connotes fire, which is yang. In King Pei’s court, the scholarly officials dress in white whereas the martial officials dress in black. Yang Cang’s sabre is hard and strong, which is yang. Therefore, to conquer it, Madam suggests Jingzhou take advantage of the slickness of rainstorm and adopt a feminine movement in wielding his combat umbrella, which in effect makes good use of the energy of yin. Most important of all, Commander Zi Yu and his “shadow” Jingzhou are related around the yin-yang paradigm. That is, when Zi Yu acts as the Commander (yang), Jingzhou is his “shadow” (yin); vice versa. That they may swap their roles in accordance with the change of conditions shows yin and yang are interchangeable in nature.

The taichi diagram, more commonly known to Westerners as the yin-yang diagram, is the most significant symbol constructed around the yin-yang paradigm in *Shadow*. The taichi diagrams serve as the locales of two important scenes in the film, the duel between Jingzhou and Yang Cang and the duet between Madam and Zi Yu. In the duel scene, a massive taichi diagram, made from bamboo and stone, serves as a distinctive battlefield, where Jingzhou stands on the white dot within the black circle (energy of yin) and Yang Cang stands on the black dot within the white circle (energy of yang). Jingzhou then crosses into Yang’s territory to challenge him for several rounds. The outcome of the duel is that Jingzhou is badly wounded, but Yang is killed. In the duet scene, Madam plays the zither on the white circle of a massive taichi diagram whereas Zi Yu plays the lute on the black circle. From the fast-paced crosscut shots, the viewer knows that the duet and the duel happen simultaneously in different places, and the duet serves as the non-diegetic background score for the duel. Interestingly, the duet sounds as furious as the duel because the husband’s and the wife’s minds and bodies are not in one but are polar opposite. Arguably, *Shadow*’s taichi diagram is metaphorical—like yin and yang, any two intertwined people or things may swap their roles due to the change of circumstance, such as the man and his “shadow”, the duel and the duet, or the dominant and the subjugated.

### **The Father and Son Structure—A Patricide Allegory**

*Shadow* is the allegory of the Father and Son structure of power in palace intrigues. It is a history of the patricide acts that the Son takes to get the Father’s woman, absolve his tyrannical threat of castration and construct the new order. In analysis of Zhang’s early historical dramas such as *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Ju Dou*

<sup>2</sup> Dong Zhongshu. “The Noble Yang and the Base Yin” (Nanzun nübei).

(1990), and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), Wendy Larson proposes that, Zhang Yimou tends to place the female protagonist between a legitimate old husband and an adulterous young lover, thus creating a moral dilemma for her. The old man represents the absolute power of patriarchy, while the young man just stands for sexual attraction because he has no real power as a subordinate to the old man (Larson, 1995, p. 227). This pattern also applies to *Shadow*. In the film, Commander Zi Yu is the signifier of the traditional patriarchy and the Father. And Jingzhou, Zi Yu's surrogate and "shadow", occupies the place of the Son. The film's central gender relationship is a triangular one, in which Madam is positioned between the Father/Zi Yu and the Son/his "shadow". This film starts with the caption superimposed on a black screen:

Facing unrelenting wars and internal power struggles, Chinese kings and nobles faced the constant threat of assassination. To survive, they secretly employed surrogates known as "shadow". Shadows served their masters by bravely risking their lives, and proved their loyalty by embracing death. Absent from the annals of history, they lived their lives in obscurity and vanished without a trace. This is a story of a shadow. The story begins as Madam, wife of the Great Commander of Pei Kingdom, faces the most difficult choice of her life.

Madam faces the most difficult choice of her life because she is torn between the Father and the Son—an old, sick, whimsical husband and his young, strong, and calm surrogate. Nevertheless, though the film story begins with Madam's dilemma, it decentralizes her and focuses on narrating the conflicts and dramas between the Father and the Son instead.

The conflicts and dramas between the Father and the Son in *Shadow* reveal a male desire to regain masculinity and sexuality. Both the Father and the Son are faced with fear of castration. Zi Yu, as the Father and master, is a castrator per se. In a documentary *Zhang Yimou's Shadow* (2018) directed by Wang Peng, Zhang Yimou says Zi Yu is sexless, though this is not explicitly depicted in the film<sup>3</sup>. Zi Yu was defeated and castrated by Yang Cang in their duel many years ago. Zi Yu was severely wounded. The defeat greatly injures him—both physically and mentally. Zi Yu has to use Jingzhou as his "shadow"—his younger and stronger "self", the Son who performs with his wife to show the public an illusion that their Commander still has strong masculinity and embodies perfect maleness—mastering both music and martial arts. Yet, as a trope, Zhang dehumanizes and even demonizes the Father because this old man is haunted by a fear of castration (Qin, 2007, pp. 227-228). In the film, Zi Yu's dishevelled hair and hysterical demeanour fit his dehumanized or demonized image well as he would take revenge upon Yang Cang at any cost. And Zi Yu is further reduced to a voyeur who peeps at his "shadow" having sex with his wife. The film's voyeuristic scene subverts the conventional Hollywood paradigm in which women are constructed as sex objects for male viewers' visual pleasure, because instead of accentuating the heroine's sexual appeal, it accentuates the repression of her old husband and her young lover. To a great extent, Zi Yu's scheme has also dehumanized and even demonized Jingzhou. Being taken away from his mother at an early age, caged for years, and then trained as Zi Yu's "shadow"/double makes Jingzhou a fearful, resentful, and self-abased man. Moreover, Zi Yu is the castrating power to Jingzhou. Arguably, Jingzhou is consumed with both a threat of castration and an Oedipus complex because he lives with Madam under the shadow of Zi Yu as his double and cannot be her real husband. In a high-angle shot from Madam's point of view, Jingzhou who is curling on the ground in the corner looks pitifully vulnerable. In the sex scene, Madam hugs him and he sobs like a baby in her arms. Then, he advances and makes love to her. This

<sup>3</sup> *Zhang Yimou's Shadow* (Zhang Yimou he ta de "Ying"). Dir. Wang Peng. Perf. Zhang Yimou, Sun Li, Deng Chao, LETV (Beijing) Co., Ltd, 2018. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRDPDHUOThM&list=PLXS\\_kG9iqRx7qqB8mwDsitmHqe3Mhdaxg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRDPDHUOThM&list=PLXS_kG9iqRx7qqB8mwDsitmHqe3Mhdaxg). Accessed on June 25, 2020.

is a coming-of-age scene of the Son done through his taking the Father's woman under the Father's voyeurism. Paradoxically, that Zi Yu and Jingzhou eventually plot to kill each other is a desperate resort to killing the "shadow" so as to regain their masculinity and sexuality.

### **Passive Femininity—No Place for Women**

*Shadow* marginalizes women and represents passive femininity. The female characters are underrepresented since only three women are introduced—Jingzhou's mother, Madam Xiaoai, and Princess Qingping. Jingzhou's mother is old, blind, and vulnerable. She is said to be used as a hostage by Commander Zi Yu to control Jingzhou. And she is only seen once in a shot in which she has been killed mysteriously. Madam Xiaoai and Princess Qingping are two beautiful young women. The film eroticizes and objectifies them, thereby expanding a tradition in Western art—"men act and women appear" (Berger, 2008). In general, in line with male-active, female-passive dynamic in mainstream Hollywood cinema, *Shadow* constructs passive women as the rewards, the rescued, and the victims, and active men as the heroes, doers, and rescuers. Such representation of gender, is like Madam's fortune-telling in the first act of this film, "This reading, is about masculine power, no place for women here".

The film represents women not as the central subject or the desiring subject, but as the object of sacrifice who functions to satisfy male desire and construct male subjectivity and sexuality. Admittedly, the female lead Madam Xiaoai has a significant narrative function. That is, she is the witness of this film story rife with male intrigues and plots. *Shadow*'s opening scene starts with a flash-forward, which is a medium close-up shot of Madam, followed by a zoom-in close-up shot of her startled eyes looking out of the door hole. And it is not until the finale when this scene is screened again that the viewer realizes it is actually the ending of the whole story. Therefore, Madam's peeping out of the door hole, reiterated twice, suggests that she witnesses the whole story of the film. Yet, engaged in wondering about why Madam is scared in the beginning and what she is about to do in the end, the viewer would find it hard to identify with her because she is disappointedly underdeveloped and does not show much subjectivity. Throughout the whole film, the camera sparsely exposes how Madam sacrifices her own interest to serve two men—her husband and his "shadow". Beautiful and resourceful as she is, she is firstly constructed as a subjugated object—she complies with her husband's plan and performs the role of being the wife of his "shadow" Jingzhou; she helps him find the way to defeat Yang Cang. Even if she finally transgresses the Confucian cult of chastity and has a love affair with Jingzhou, she is not the desiring subject. The viewer sees her sympathy and care for Jingzhou, but hardly sees her expressive acts of subjectivity. So it is hard for the viewer to understand her sexual desire and instinct. In the sex scene, she becomes an object who helps the subject/the Son to fulfil his coming of age since it is Jingzhou who advances and makes Madam his woman. In addition, in the final scene, Jingzhou returns her sachel, walks away from her and goes out of the court to declare to the officials that he, the commander, has slayed the assassinator. Thus, Madam is reinforced as the object of sacrifice as Jingzhou gives her up for power.

Likewise, Qingping functions as the object of sacrifice as well with limited subjectivity. As the princess of Pei Kingdom, she just has apparent privileges, such as going to court with King Pei, protesting against his decision behind the screen whenever disagreeing with him. However, she has no real autonomy and cannot control her life and fate. At the mercy of her brother's whim, she is offered to Yang Ping as his concubine for keeping the alliance between two kingdoms. Insulted by this arranged marriage, Qingping rebels, takes up the role of Hua Mulan, fights against Yang Ping and dies together with him. But she does not realize that she

should subvert her brother because he is the very man who abuses patriarchal authority and sacrifices her. She is doomed to death, which is a typical predestination for stereotyped disempowered women. As a supporting role, Qingping's characterization is even more inadequate than that of Madam. Both women are rather flat characters. And they are marginalized and represented as the object of sacrifice. Such representations are quite authentic given the fact that women were explicitly secluded from official life and victimized in political conflicts to various degrees over a long period in old China.

### **Toxic Masculinity—Masculinity Deviates From the *Wen-Wu* Paradigm**

*Shadow* explores how toxic and violent Chinese masculinity can become when it deviates from *wen-wu* prowess. According to Kam Louie, Chinese masculinity has been conceptualized around the *wen-wu* paradigm: *wen* qualities include cultural behaviour, mastery of scholarly works, and refinement; *wu* attributes include martial prowess, mastery of physical art, and strength. *Wen* usually takes precedence of *wu*, but it is desirable for a man to possess both attributes with regard to national government and self-cultivation (Brownell & Wassertrom, 2002, p. 28). In *Shadow*, all the three lead male characters, including Zi Yu, King Pei, and Jingzhou, perform to cultivate and embody their masculinities around the *wen-wu* paradigm, such as practising Chinese martial art, calligraphy, and musical instruments. However, none of them harmonizes both *wen* and *wu* prowess and masters them. On the contrary, all of them become power hungry men who get involved in intrigues in order to attain supreme power. Therefore, they deviate from *wen* and *wu* prowess and become increasingly ruthless and manipulative. Consequently, they engage in brewing plots, sacrificing their beloved women, and killing anyone who gets in their way.

The palace intrigues involve three political camps with Commander Zi Yu, King Pei, General Yang Cang as their de facto leaders respectively. The plot is explicit, which centres on how Zi Yu manipulates Jingzhou and Madam to achieve his ambition of defeating Yang Cang, retaking the lost Pei City and replacing King Pei. The subplots are implicit, and focus on how King Pei double-crosses Zi Yu and manipulates General Tianzhan and Princess Qingping to strengthen his power, and on how Yang Cang double-crosses King Pei and bribes Lu Yan to get the intelligence of Pei Kingdom. Obviously, obsessed with power, these men become as unscrupulous as King Pei claims, "False, true. True, false. Just like a game of chess, but after all, who are the pawns"? For example, to fool King Pei and Yang Cang, Zi Yu matches his wife with his double and then becomes a maniac voyeur lurking round them. To lull Yang Cang, King Pei offers his sister to Yang's son as a concubine. As for Jingzhou, he could escape the palace with Madam and live a common life, but he finally chooses to come into power. With adequate characterizations, these male roles are round, full, and complicated. Nevertheless, they also fall into a stereotyped male character in imperial China—Machiavellian politicians who rise above others by fair or foul means. Worst of all, deviating from *wen-wu* prowess, their masculinities become increasingly toxic and violent.

The apex of toxic masculinity in the final scene intensifies the viewer's experience of violence as Man becomes absolutely brutal and ruthless killing off all his opponents in order to triumph over palace intrigues. It is a lengthy scene which keeps authenticity of actual killing time and intensified continuity. It shows in great detail how the three male lead roles, the King, Commander Zi Yu, and his "shadow" Jingzhou, unleash their toxic masculinity by taking extremely deceitful and ruthless actions in killing off their opponents.

Set in King Pei's court, the final scene is most kinetic and violent with a pronounced theatrical sense of performance. However, too many turns and twists make the killings dramatic and unconvincing. With plenty

frames of Chinese calligraphy and Chinese screens, King Pei's court seems quite intricate. With its door shut, the court gives a strong sense of enclosure of Chineseness, and serves as a good theatre for the tricky assassinations to take place. Yet, Zhang elaborates too many dramatic acts. For instance, it is reasonable that King Pei cuts Lu Yan's throat all of sudden given that Lu betrays him. But given that he is a king, it is undignified for him to keep tabbing the corpse and cursing at it to vent his anger. Besides, King Pei performs a monologue satirizing Jingzhou's replacement of Zi Yu as Madam's younger husband. After that, King Pei is stabbed from behind by Zi Yu when he opens the box to check whether Zi Yu's head is inside. And for a comparatively long time in an intense killing scene, King Pei lies on the ground, spitting out blood whereas Zi Yu criticizes him and proclaims the ambition of replacing him. Then, Zi Yu attempts to assault Jingzhou after giving a seemingly sincere monologue,

...I don't have much time. Leave all of this to me. Jing. Jing. Kill him (King Pei). Avenge your mother. Then take Madam with you. I've spent my life on power games and war, never tasted the beauty of the world. Go live it for me. Go. The further, the better.

Seeing through Zi Yu's trick, Jingzhou dodges being stabbed in the back. Jingzhou fights back without any hesitation and keeps stabbing Zi Yu to death. Jingzhou places a mask on Zi Yu's face, which serves as a patricide ritual that finalizes Jingzhou and Zi Yu swapping their roles—Jingzhou being the Commander/the Father and Zi Yu the “shadow”/the Son. Then in the next dramatic shot, Jingzhou slays King Pei while saying “I'll summon the Palace doctor. Stay calm”. Finally, Jingzhou, the only male survivor in the locked court, opens the door, announcing to the officials that King Pei has died by assassination and he, the Commander, has killed the assassinator on the spot. This final scene is absolutely violent as the Machiavellian politicians completely discard *wen* prowess and unleash their *wu* prowess, thus making their masculinity extremely toxic. Yet, too many turns and twists make the acts of killings unconvincing. As the only witness, Madam is shocked, motionless and voiceless throughout the killings. The film has an open ending, but it is to be expected that, with frail femininity, Madam cannot transcend the boundaries of her own situation and become a counter force against the toxic masculinity.

### Conclusions

In *Zhang Yimou's Shadow*, Director Zhang Yimou claims that he simply wants to make a film that conveys an authentic sense of Chineseness<sup>4</sup>. He has achieved this goal—from its film form to its contents, *Shadow* is a visually striking drama constructed around authentic Chinese elements and concepts, such as Chinese ink-brush painting and calligraphy, yin-yang, taichi diagram, *wen-wu*, zither, lute, and so on. *Shadow* centres on how Jingzhou/the “shadow”/the Son overthrows Commander Zi Yu/the master/the Father, takes his place as the Commander and comes into power. Jingzhou is related to people in a tricky way, either as the Commander or his “shadow”. The film is in line with the male-active, female-passive gender dynamic in mainstream Hollywood cinema. On one hand, it conventionally depicts women's desires as subordinate to men's instead of foregrounding their subjectivity, though it reiterates the value of embracing feminine energy and maintaining yin-yang balance. On the other hand, it constructs strong masculinity, richness of characterization and strong subjectivity for the male characters, Jingzhou in particular. However, the male

<sup>4</sup> *Zhang Yimou's Shadow* (Zhang Yimou he ta de “Ying”). Dir. Wang Peng. Perf. Zhang Yimou, Sun Li, Deng Chao, LETV (Beijing) Co., Ltd, 2018. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRDPDHUOThM&list=PLXS\\_kG9iqRx7qqB8mwDsitmHqe3Mhdaxg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRDPDHUOThM&list=PLXS_kG9iqRx7qqB8mwDsitmHqe3Mhdaxg). Accessed on June 25, 2020.

characters, instead of harmonizing their *wen-wu* prowess for national government and self-cultivation, deviate from the *wen-wu* paradigm and become increasingly unscrupulous schemers in pursuit of power. The final scene represents extremely toxic and violent masculinity. Though it is very dramatic, it suits the dark motif of palace intrigues well that the “shadow”/Jingzhou/the Son must be absolutely brutal and ruthless in order to defeat all his enemies, replace the Commander/the Father, and create new order.

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