

Image of an “Unknown Woman” in the American and Chinese Film *Letter from an Unknown Woman*

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Letter from an Unknown Woman is one of the most well-known works of Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig. Since its first publication in 1922, there have been two film adaptations based on this novella. In 1948, Max Ophüls, a German-born director, directed a black-and-white drama romance film of the same name based on a script adapted by Howard Koch and released it in American. In 2005, a Chinese film based on this widely spread love story was adapted and directed by the Chinese female director Xu Jinglei. In this paper, two film adaptations released in different cultural contexts and historical backgrounds will be compared. Based on feminist theories, this paper will expound the similarities and differences in the portrayal of the unknown woman, which can imply unique understandings of two films about women’s role in a love relationship.

Keywords: *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, Max Ophüls, Xu Jinglei, image

1. Introduction

Letter from an Unknown Woman is a novella of the Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig published in 1922. It tells the story of a woman’s lifelong passion for a writer at the turn of the twentieth century. The writer receives a letter written in the manner of a confession of a dead woman who has been in love with him almost all her life. Although she first falls in love with him when she is thirteen and gives birth to his son, he scarcely knows his secret admirer. Zweig’s novella was first adapted into a film script by Howard Koch and then adapted into a Hollywood feature film by film director Max Ophüls in 1948, who was born in Germany and worked in Germany, France, and United States. In 1982, the novella was translated into Chinese by Zhang Yushu at Peking University. It was subsequently adapted into a Chinese film by the female Director Xu Jinglei, who won the Altad is New Director Award at the San Sebastian International Film Festival with this film, and it achieved commercial success in China as well. Zweig’s novella gains extensive popularity because of its touching plots and fine psychological descriptions about a woman in love, but with its potential praises of a woman devoting her life to a man, who never knows her, this novella is seen by many critics as the embodiment of male consciousness. This story, which receives constant concern in gender studies, is adapted at different times by a male and female director, and the two films are accepted by American and Chinese audiences, who are affected by different traditions and cultures. This paper focuses on images of the “unknown woman” in the American and Chinese film

adaptations and compares understanding of the two film adaptations about this love tragedy created by Zweig's novella.

2. A Woman, Who is Unknown both to Her Lover and to Herself

The "unknown woman" who writes the letter is represented by Lisa Berndle from Vienna and Miss Jiang from Peking in the American and Chinese film adaptations. In the two films, the selfless and hopeless love of a woman from her adolescence to death is taken as the key to characterize the female protagonist. In terms of the female as a selfless and despairing lover, the two films have similarities in their portrayal of the "unknown woman". One of the most profound discussions about the woman in love emerges in *The Second Sex* of Simone de Beauvoir. This early feminist classic makes a crucial point clear that love has a different meaning for men and women. It is possible for men to be passionate lovers at certain times in their life, but they remain sovereign subjects; the beloved woman is only one value among others. On the contrary, love is for women to relinquish everything (Beauvoir, 1989, p. 713). De Beauvoir points out that women are willing to do so because only love can structure their life by delivering them into the proper roles of wife and mother (Beauvoir, 1989, p. 714). However, a woman obliterates her own existence in living through man and masks her enslavement through overvaluation of her mate. By deifying her mate, a woman creates an illusion that is hard to maintain (Beauvoir 1989, p. 725). De Beauvoir's perception of women in love resounds in the two film adaptations.

Both Miss Jiang in the Chinese film and Lisa in the American film devote their life to a man who never remembers them. The female protagonist loses her father at a young age and lives with her mother, who is very strict with her in a block full of mediocre people. At this time, an elegant artist, a pianist in the American version and a writer in the Chinese version, comes into her life, which definitely brings something attractive into her stagnant life. She finds a man in her life she cares about, takes on his interests, and tries to improve herself to match him, so the love for a man gives meaning to her tedious life. However, as audiences of the two films we can find that the man's romance nature decides that he will not stay faithful to one of his lovers. Audiences can clearly realize the discrepancy in the male protagonist's image, which impresses them and which the woman in her letter presents. In both films, we find many scenes that delineate the male protagonist's actions unknown to the female protagonist. In Ophüls' film, the camera leaves Lisa to focus on Stefan, the male protagonist, secretly instructing a waiter give his excuses to another woman. When Xu's film presents Ms. Jiang sending a bunch of white roses to the writer on his birthday, the camera focuses on scenes in the writer's home, which is unknowable to Ms. Jiang. It indicates that Miss Jiang or Lisa's lifelong love is developed to a large extent based on her illusion. De Beauvoir suggests that there are women whose worship sometimes find better satisfaction in her lover's absence than his presence, for inaccessibility of their lovers allows their romantic fantasy to be sustained (Beauvoir, 1989, pp. 722-723). The Film audience of both adaptations can find extensive scenes that contrast the heroine's tedious family life and the elegant lifestyle of the hero. It clearly implies that the pursuit of an ideal lover in fantasy can save the female protagonist from her boring and hopeless life and bring her into a new life full of passion and pure love. Love in this way makes her become the one who waits for the rescue and puts her in a passive position. In the two film adaptations, the female protagonist writes the letter, from which the screen story issues, but her writing of letter is subsumed by the act of the male protagonist's apprehension of it (Fischer, 1990, p. 178). The woman can write her life story in the letter, but it is meaningful, only when the man reads it. In their relationship,

the woman is the one who is read by a man, while the man is the one who has the right to read and look. Although the woman fixes her gaze on him throughout her life, she is never seen by the man. Therefore, her love and even her existence as a lover are unknown to the man.

Furthermore, Lisa or Ms. Jiang is unknown not only to the man but also to herself. She doesn't realize that she devotes herself to an inaccessible imaginary hero, so that according to De Beauvoir she may never have to face him in person, for beings of flesh and blood would be fatally contrary to her dream (Beauvoir, 1989, p. 727). She lives like her "ideal" lover: she reads the same books, admires the same artworks, takes on his interests. In living through her love for the man, she becomes the reflection of her lover and thus an "unknown woman" to herself. She loses her own identity and negates her own existence, so she is unknown and invisible to both sides in a love relationship, i.e. to her lover and herself. Although the existence of female is eliminated in the asymmetric love relationship, devoting themselves to men seems to be the only possibility for women to structure their life. It is the dilemma of females, which both film adaptations highlight. Without a career or a respected cultural position, getting the proper roles of wife and mother through a love relationship is the only way for Lisa and Ms. Jiang to finally find themselves a way to live a valuable life and a place in the male dominant society. By adoring a man, the heroine is allowed to connect herself with male power. She cannot really partake in the male power, but she perceives herself as valuable through the connection with society's dominant power. In becoming an incarnation of her "ideal" lover in fantasy, the heroine of two films can vicariously experience what it means to be a subject in the world under the circumstances in which women are deprived of the freedom to structure their life independently. Thus, scenes where the heroine develops the same interest as her lover indicates, on one hand, women's efforts to gain the approval of their male lovers, on the other hand, their attempt to experience their own subjectivity through devoting themselves to a heterosexual love relationship. However, the subjectivity experienced in this way is essentially vicarious. The heroine's sacrifice in love ultimately places her in a precarious position of an unknown woman. The ending of Ophüls' and Xu's film, where the life of the heroine comes to an end, while her lover finishes reading her letter, has double implications: the end of the woman's physicality implied by her death and the end of her unknown mental world implied by the letter. With the demise of the heroine's physical existence and mental world, her unknown love and life become unknowable.

3. An "Unknown Woman" in Ophüls' Film Adaptation

3.1 Parallel between Lisa's Love and Religion

As mentioned, both films show an unseen woman who negates her own existence in love but are released in different times and countries. The American and Chinese film adaptations have their own features. Critics have noted Ophüls' film adaptation implies a Catholic sense of fate. This point of view can be proved in some scenes with a religious undertone: Lisa gives birth to her child in a Catholic hospital, and the letter telling Stefan of her death comes on stationery emblazoned with a cross. However, it is oversimplified to claim that the religious sense is only an element used to enrich the film's narration. Lucy Fischer points out that critics ignored the parallels between the heroine's stance and that of a religious novice (Fischer, 1990, p. 170). Lisa's attitude toward Stefan is similar to the worship of a god. The scene in which Lisa sneaks into Stefan's apartment and walks through it can evoke the association of a religious pilgrimage. His room has more the hallowed atmosphere of a

church than of a bachelor apartment. Like the religious devotee, Lisa's god, her lover is absent and abstract, because Stefan's presence in her life is actually in the form of an illusory mental image.

According to De Beauvoir's perception, the traditional woman sees in her male lover a god, and love is for her a religion since the woman is "anyway doomed to dependence, she will prefer to serve a god, rather than obey tyrants" (Beauvoir, 1989, pp. 713-714). Lisa's pious love can demonstrate De Beauvoir's perception of the deification of the male lover. Lisa's relationship with Stefan can be analogized to the relationship between god and votress. Thus, Stefan's love comes in the form of God's gift, which is for believers an incomparable glory. Lisa's devoting her life to Stefan can be seen as a sacred sacrifice, which is objectified in the white roses given to Stefan every year on his birthday. As De Beauvoir points out, this divine relationship is only a mask for the enslavement of women in love. In transforming a master to a deity, Lisa obscures the nature of her servitude and endures her position as an unknown woman in the love relationship. In adding scenes with religious connotations, Ophüls' film indicates that love becomes a religion for Lisa, and her servitude in love becomes a sacrifice for belief. The religious undertone can be seen as a projection of relationship patterns of heterosexual love and disproportional places of male and female in love. Through the association between love and religion, Ophüls' film denies to a certain extent the tragic position of Lisa, which would characterize her life as hysterical indulging in unrequited love. Rather, it gives the audience a different perspective to interpret Lisa's infatuation in love, which makes her love divine and reasonable.

3.2 Modification of the Heroine's Image in Accordance with Social Expectations

Unlike the woman in Zweig's novella, who surrenders to rich men to guarantee a decent life for her son, Lisa in the Ophüls' film adaptation builds up a family with a rich man from the upper class. It can be inferred that this lifestyle can better meet the social criterion of the narrated time in the film, which still puts a high value on family. The choice of marriage also conforms to the traditional values and rather conventional attitudes of Hollywood films toward a woman in love in the 1940s. On one hand, getting married and starting a family is an understandable and acceptable choice for audience. On the other hand, by assigning Lisa to a bourgeois marriage, the film reflects what the traditional society expects from women: entering into marriage through a love relationship and getting the role of wife and mother. The different life choice of the female protagonist in Ophüls' film adaptation indicates the lack of options and possibility of making options independently in women's life. Like other female figures in the film, Lisa never questions the assumption that love is the main concern in women's life. Instead, it seems only to inquire about what kind of lover she devotes herself. Women like Lisa with romantic, unconventional goals in love also have to submit to the constraints imposed by society and culture and put themselves into the socially acceptable role of a wife. The lack of options in Lisa's life is a possible explanation for her monomania to Stefan, which the film offers. If she didn't dedicate herself to some kind of love relationship, she couldn't find a man who can possibly deliver her into the position of wife and mother. If her passion were not dedicated to an "ideal" lover like Stefan, it would be assigned to her insipid marriage with her husband.

The constraints of the society and cultural world are invoked in the Linz sequence, in which Lisa dates a young lieutenant. With marching-band music, the camera presents a dull conversation between Lisa and her date. The music stresses the young man's military role and implies that he is an eligible marriage partner in a

conventional sense, but their boring conversation refutes this argument. Marriage with the lieutenant will be the exact opposite of Lisa’s imaginary passionate love. Besides, the camera leaves Lisa to focus on her parent’s secret conversations discussing their hopes for her engagement. The shift of the focus to her parents’ wish, which is also a demand of the traditional society, explains why Lisa finally chooses a socially acceptable lifestyle: marriage. Lisa’s marriage sows the seed of tragedy of Stefan’s fatal duel with her husband. Constraints imposed on women will ultimately affect men as well. The duel of Lisa’s secret lover and legitimate partner at the end of the film, which isn’t a plot of the original novella, reflects the tragedy of male and female in the traditional relationship pattern. The so-called dominant males will also be victims in a love relationship which deprives women of the right to choose their own life and denies their subjectivity.

4. An “Unknown Woman” in Xu’s Film Adaptation

4.1 Dilemma of Female Consciousness in Xu’s Film

As a female director in the 21st century, Xu Jinglei has expressed that her film aims to tell a pure love story. It is not necessary to judge what the “unknown woman” does for her lover. From a sentence quoted from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s lyric in the film advertisement, we can see Xu Jinglei’s view of love: “I love you, but that is not your business.” Xu interprets Zweig’s novella from a different perspective:

I felt it was the man who was pitiful and the girl not at all. You may sympathize with her but actually she does not need your sympathy. She makes all her own decisions... So when I read the story again, I felt sorry for the man. I felt that this man, after having lived over 40 years, didn’t know who he was, didn’t realize the kind of life he’d lived. (Uhde, 2006)

Based on this idea, Xu’s film adaptation presents a new image of the “unknown woman”, who doesn’t wait for gaze from men, but can read and observe herself. The female protagonist, Ms. Jiang observes her image in a mirror three times in three different phases of her life: In her childhood, where she meets and falls in love with Mr. Xu, she observes herself in the mirror and feels for the first time her desire to a man. In her student years, after she has the first intimate moment with Mr. Xu, she sees a sexually mature woman in the mirror. After giving birth to Mr. Xu’s son and spending a night with him years later, she watches in the mirror as her lover pushes a few banknotes into her Muff, and the two of them look at each other in the mirror. Through three scenes in which the heroine gazes at herself in the mirror, the film affirms that a woman can explore her own identity for herself, and it is through this exploration a woman awakens her self-awareness and subjectivity. The heroine, who can gaze upon herself and explore herself as a subject, is capable of making her life choices on her own initiative, whether it be devoting her life to a man who never remembers her or giving birth to and raising Mr. Xu’s child. From this perspective, Mr. Xu is not only a heart breaker, on whom the heroine wastes her whole life. He is the one who promotes the development of her own identity and her female consciousness. Thus, Xu Jinglei’s film adaptation doesn’t depict a tragic story of an unknown woman, who sacrifices herself for love, but the history of a woman’s growth, in which the male lover plays an important role, but he is not the one in control of her life. In Zweig’s novella, the heroine refuses the proposal of a rich widowed Graf because she wants to continue waiting for her lover as an unmarried woman. The heroine in Ophüls’ film goes into a socially acceptable but dull marriage because of a lack of options in her life. In contrast, the heroine of Xu’s film is unwilling to accept the proposal of a young officer. Her reason is that “I (the heroine) don’t think about that. I can’t think so far ahead. I just live in

the moment”.¹ It is clear from the contrast that the “unknown woman” in Xu’s film adaptation has developed her own understanding about life, and she is possible to make decisions following her wishes.

Despite the female self-consciousness and self-confidence showed in Xu’s film, it’s hard to interpret the female protagonist as a totally liberated and independent woman. With a closer look at the construction of her identity, it can be seen that the image of the male lover plays a decisive role, if not the only important role in the development of her identity. The image of Mr. Xu takes the most important place in every phase of her life: in her childhood, in her adolescence and in her motherhood. With his lifestyle, which is deeply influenced by the westernization trend in China around 1900, Mr. Xu is undoubtedly regarded as an impulse for the heroine to think about her own life and herself. Since the heroine encounters Mr. Xu, she begins to explore the world of love and sexuality. The love relationship with Mr. Xu is a vital step for her entire mature adulthood. The film presents the development of the heroine’s self-consciousness, but almost all steps in this process depend on her relationship with her male lover. Moreover, despite the awakened self-consciousness that enables the heroine to decide her life independently, she can’t free her emotional and mental world from the influence of Mr. Xu. Therefore, the core of Xu Jinglei’s film adaptation is the dilemma of women’s self-growth and self-consciousness, which stands behind the feminist view: “I love you, but that is not your business.”

In the process of growth, women explore their identity and develop their self-consciousness, which allows them to act and decide independently. However, this development is ultimately driven by the relationship with a male lover. Women like Ms. Jiang have the possibility and ability to structure their life but they never question whether love relationships should be the core of their life. They depend emotionally and mentally on their male lovers. In Xu’s film, this dilemma of female self-consciousness finds expression in the image of an “unknown woman” who hesitates between self-determination and obsession in love for a lifelong time.

4.2 An “Unknown Woman” as the Other

In the Chinese film adaptation of Xu Jinglei, the life story of an “unknown woman” unfolds from 1935 to 1947 in Beijing, and many Chinese cultural icons, such as Peking Opera, rickshaws in Chinese Hutongs, Chinese New Year are highlighted. The film relates the love tragedy of the female protagonist, Miss Jiang, to the special era in Chinese history, where the Marco Polo Bridge Incident and the retrocession of Beijing took place. This makes the image of the “unknown woman” from an European literary work vivid in the story told in Chinese and makes it possible for audiences whose reading expectations are developed in Chinese culture to resonant with the “unknown woman”. In the whole film, which is impressed by the charm of oriental, Mr. Xu is characterized by his westernized lifestyle and mannerism. As a writer and journalist, he has lots of foreign language books, often smokes cigars, and rides a motorcycle, which is rare in the 1930s in China. His flat is also decorated in European style: glass door with semi-circular vaulting, rococo-style sofa, oil paintings, typewriter, figural candle holders, gramophones, a beautiful European porcelain female figurine. All these details manifest the trend of history around 1900 in China: Profound social changes followed the outbreak of the opium war in 1840 in China. Both the traditional social system and people’s daily life are exposed to the influence of Western culture. Particularly in big cities of China, people became increasingly interested in imported products from the West and Western

¹ Original: 我不想，也想不了那么远，我只活现在。

lifestyles. Mr. Xu's life is under the influence of China's westernization since the middle of the 1900s. In this sense, Mr. Xu can be seen as a symbol of the Western culture.

From Ms. Jiang's dressing, decoration in her home and her mother's parenting methods, we can infer that Ms. Jiang grows up in a traditional Chinese family. After Mr. Xu moves into the Siheyuan (Chinese courtyard house), where Ms. Jiang lives with her mother, elements of the Western culture are for the first time presented in her life. In the film, Ms. Jiang peeked surreptitiously into Mr. Xu's house and gazed at him when she was a young girl. This action is motivated not only by her infatuation with Mr. Xu but also by her will to observe Western culture manifested in Mr. Xu's life. Mr. Xu actually introduces a cultural Other into the heroine's life. The Other is "what eludes our consciousness and knowing and resides outside the sphere of our culture and community" (Robin Kevin, 2005, p. 249). The cultural Other evokes her interest and admiration while challenging her understanding about life and herself. In observing Mr. Xu's westernized life, the heroine rethinks her life and begins to construct her identity as a woman aware of different possibilities of life. Based on this observation and desire for the exotic world Mr. Xu presents to her, she makes a series of life decisions that can be seen as symbols of female emancipation in the 1930s and 1940s in China: She leaves her wealthy home in Shandong and studies in a University in Beijing. She takes part in a demonstration against Japanese aggression, where Mr. Xu notices her for the first time. She has a sexual relationship with Mr. Xu and gives birth to a child before marriage, which is a sin for a Chinese woman at that time.

Mr. Xu does present the heroine with an exotic world of the Other, which becomes the beginning of her identity construction. However, the other implies a boundary, a distinction between inside and outside. Mr. Xu belongs to China's high intellectual class in the early 20th century. In general, members from this class were financially burdenless, educated in the Western style, emancipated in thought, and engaged in spiritual production of the society. By contrast, the heroine's parents are both primary school teachers who belong to ordinary intellectuals. They are well educated, versed in traditional Chinese cultural classics, and attach great importance to their children's education, but they always live in strained circumstances. After the death of her father, the financial situation of her family becomes more difficult. In order to make ends meet, her mother remarries a rich farmer from Shandong. From the way the farmer dresses and talks in the film, the audience can conjecture that he is in terms of lifestyle and horizons no different from other peasants who live lifelong in the country and have little education. Therefore, the heroine and her lover belong to different classes with different cultural conventions and life patterns. After the heroine moves to her stepfather's village in Shandong, the gap between their spiritual worlds is widened. Mr. Xu presents a world of the Other, which attracts the heroine and influences her life choices. It also means that the heroine is excluded Other to the class to which Mr. Xu belongs. After the birth of her son, she becomes a courtesan and accompanies high-ranking intellectuals like Mr. Xu to fancy social occasions, but she appears only as a partner of a man, as someone's subordinate, which determines that she can't be really accepted as a member of this class. As an outsider, she can only observe and gaze at this unreachable zone. By manifesting significant differences in their social class, lifestyle and cultural conventions, the Chinese film adaptation portrays the "unknown woman" as the Other in her lover's spiritual and social life: In her love relationship with Mr. Xu, the "unknown woman" never actually becomes a part of Mr. Xu's spiritual world. She is the Other whose love won't be requited. In social life, the "unknown woman" is the Other for the

high intellectual circle represented by Mr. Xu. The film gives an interpretation of the modifier “unknown” in the title *Letter from an unknown woman*: Being unknown means becoming the Other.

5. Conclusion

Based on the tragic prototype of Zweig’s novella, Ophüls’ and Xu Jinglei’s film adaptations emphasize that the “unknown woman” eliminates her subjectivity in love relationship and thus becomes unknown both to herself and to her lover. However, the two film adaptations interpret Zweig’s story from different perspectives and present different aspects of this love tragedy. In adding a religious connotation to the love relationship, Ophüls’ film points out that the “unknown woman” transforms her male lover to a deity to disguise her servitude in love. Besides, Ophüls’ film designates the unknown woman a socially acceptable role as a wife in a conventional bourgeois marriage to avoid provoking the prevailing social conventions in the 1940s. It also expresses a critic on the female gender role in a traditional society: Going into marriage and getting the role of wife and mother that the society expects becomes the only option in women’s life. Xu Jinglei’s film adaptation reflects the love tragedy from the perspective of the “unknown woman” and adds anti-traditional, feminist thoughts in the configuration of the “unknown woman”, which shows a female director’s attempt to challenge the male dominance indicated in Zweig’s novella. Xu’s film portrays an “unknown woman” with partially awakened self-consciousness and capable of exploring and structuring her own identity. Devoting her whole life to an unrequited love can be seen as a life choice made voluntarily by the “unknown woman”. Even though she is unknown to her lover, this love relationship is a constitutive element of her self-growth. In spite of her self-consciousness, the unknown woman is still caught in a dilemma: Her obsession with a male lover accompanies the awakening of her self-consciousness. Her emotional and spiritual world is never free from dependence on a man who can’t remember her. In addition, Xu Jinglei’s film adaptation places a personal story in the historical context of China’s 1930s and 1940s, a time when the Chinese and Western cultures collided. The significant differences in culture and lifestyle between two social classes represented by the “unknown woman” and her lover indicate that she is the Other in her lover’s spiritual and social life. It is this otherness that determines her identity as an unknown woman.

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