

From Tenderness to Merciless: The Transfigured Female Identity of Women's Revenge Films During the 70s to 80s Across Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan

Julien/I Chung Chang

Fu Jen Catholic University, Taipei, Taiwan

This paper explores female images in the so-called “women’s revenge” film genre of the 70s and 80s, produced in Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. On the surface, these films invariably attracted an audience in that period by using a lavish amount of sexual elements; underneath the women characters follow a drastically different trajectory amidst the historical and societal changes of the respective settings. That suggests that these B pictures should not be considered “abhorrent” by normal citizens, due to they have reverberations, as the violent female serves as a signifier to reflect social repression. However, pornography ends such erotic films as a type in Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, these revenge films go through a transfiguration for several reasons, such as mafia control, decolonization, fear, and censorship. This paper will not uncover all the background issues as western-inspired film scholarship delves into such neglected “bad” movies, these women’s revenge films reveal their own heteroglossia, which sets up a peculiar chronotop in a Bakhtinian interpretation. Cultural study can widen the spectrum of research into many un-discovered areas, such as these campy but interesting bad movies.

Keywords: women’s revenge films, erotic films, Taiwan’s social realist film, female body

Introduction

From the very early age of drama in Greece and Rome there exist the strong female characters called female avengers. A few examples include Nemesis among the goddesses, who punishes the ones who do not respect divine law, and Medea, a wrathful woman against her husband who inspired many playwrights like Euripides and Seneca to write imaginative tragedies. Women are never as weak as what Hamlet describes his betraying mother, Gertrude.

The theme of revenge, along with a heavy amount of gore, violence and exaggerated anger, continues to attract audience via B films or campy flicks whose makers often transgress common notions of sensuality. It is an excitement that provides the basic attraction all genre films. Revenge movies, in particular, have often been stigmatized, for people always consider them too low-brow and spooky. Perhaps for the reason why most film scholars tend to neglect those films. Although female avengers commonly exist, the limits of tastes of the academic eye have deterred further exploration of the deeper meanings of those ferocious women, especially in Asia.¹

Julien/I Chung Chang, lecturer, Ph.D. student, Graduate Program of Cross-Cultural Studies, Fu Jen Catholic University.

¹ More recent studies show that Western scholars have been working on B films like Paul Wells who is famous for his study on horror (zombie) movies during the 50s.

This paper aims to search for the meaning of female revenge films by examining the films during the 1970s from Japan, such as the pioneering Toei Studio's *Pinky Violence* (ピンキーパイオレンス) series, as well as individual works made in Hong Kong and Taiwan. *Pinky Violence* is a trendy film that Toei Studio endeavored to produce to combat with the threat from the rising TV industry in the early 70s. Directors like Suzuki Norifumi and Ido Junya started to make a series of female revenge films, and those exploitative films introduced the sexy stars like Ike Reiko and Kaji Meiko to the Japanese audience at the same time. Not long after *Pinky Violence* from 1973, Hong Kong's Shaw Brothers Company also released several women's revenge films such as Ho Meng-hua's *The Kiss of Death* (1974), *Big Bad Sis* (1976) (see Figure 6), and Sun Chung's *The Sexy Killer* (1974) that topped the box office in Hong Kong. The Taiwan-born actress, Chen Ping, has done a gracious job both in nudity and fighting in those movies, so she became the representative sex star during the 1970s in Hong Kong.

Taiwan's female revenge films came out amidst a wave of Social Realist Films in the early 80s. *Queen Bee* (1981), *A Crazy Woman in Love* (1982), and *Underground Wife* (1980) were all produced under this trend and they brought the actresses to fame and fortune at once.

Comparing those female revenge films from the above three East Asian areas, it is easy to find a cultural distinction exists based on each country's social and economic status that affected the level of production.² The female avengers also appeared in the films with specific attitudes, which is what this paper means to explore in the following sections.

From a genealogical perspective, Japanese filmmakers adapted Japanese period drama as prototype, such early movies like *Les Vierges du Shokun* (徳川女系図, 1968) shaped the formulation of later female revenge films in Japan, even though the inspiration itself does not pose a typical female revenge story.

The filmmakers in Hong Kong and Taiwan made female revenge films rooted the true conditions of the poor. *The Kiss of Death* and *Big Bad Sis* both encapsulate the sad stories of the factory working girls used and exploited for work as well as the capitalistic social apparatus that propels such exploitation. Scenes of the night clubs, dark alleys, and the endless machines contributed to a breathless atmosphere of the films.

The success of *The Kiss of Death* gave the inspiration for Taiwan's filmmakers to make the similar movies such as *Underground Wife*, but a major difference is that the female protagonist here had far more power than the poor female factory workers in Hong Kong. Taiwan's film industry (the company of criminal films) lacked initial inspiration so it copied the successful films. But *Queen Bee* heralded a new type of Taiwanese female revenge film and delved into a series of following copycat films. The opportunistic tendency of Taiwan's film making thus marked the film industry infamously in the early 80s.

A compare-and-contrast study of the films from the three areas shows a heteroglossia in which the different regional films interact with one another with their individual and peculiar qualities formulated under their regional cultural background.

In addition, a constant re-modeling process within the genre of these B films enables them continue to attract audience. Paradoxically, women's revenge films always challenge the limit of the expression of images, even as they face the constraints of censorship and social standard. To balance these extremes, female revenge

² That is why it is meaningful to embark on a journey of exploring B films, especially those produced during the 1970s and 1980s, a paradoxical period in both countries' stage with strong economic growth and a vigorous film industry amidst the fierce anti-government movements. The Anti-Anppo movement in Japan and Meilidao Incident in Taiwan were happening at the same time.

films always end in a tragic epilogue, in which the heroines are caught by the police or destroyed themselves. The stereotypical and predictable endings weaken the possibility to further expand the depth of these films.

Whether or not one likes these films, by retrieving and re-examining those movies, it is never insignificant to override limits through re-defining and interpreting these artifacts from a cultural-studies perspective.

The Discussion of Revenge Films in the West

The 1970s is an interesting era to retrieve in history. Starting from the 1950s, the world went through a riotous period in which anti-McCarthyism (1950-54), Cuba crisis (1963), and students' anti-social movements happened in individual countries like the United States and Japan. The Vietnam and Korea Wars added into this flush of history that is so boisterous. However, it is at the same time that the famous thinkers were also on their high days: Foucault, Derrida, and Kristeva, name only a few. In art, during the late 1960s to the 1970s, in aesthetics there was the de-centralizing movement that renewed the role of looking at art. The Frankfurt school began to criticize Hollywood while they interrogated the entwined relationships between popular films, the industry, and capitalism.

Social liberalization allured many early constraints on film production. In contrast to the big production films from the 40s to 50s, small budget film with sexual themes arose in the late 1960s. Often with criminal or weird themes, erotic films thrived for the next 10 years until video killed them off in the early 1980s. Gerard Damiano's *Deep Throat* (1973) was one of the examples to inspire many filmmakers to think about how to make low-scale movies into big box-office hit. In Europe and Japan, this phenomenon occurred. Even though directors such as Oshima Nagisa or Pasolini have already established quintessential status which surpassed common pornographers, erotic films rising in the 1970s are mostly not considered great films.

In this circumstance, female revenge films or B films like *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) and *Lipstick* (1976) became classics that cannot be ignored when dealing with the Rape-Revenge Films; afterglows like the French directors Gasper Noé's *Seul contre Tous* (*I Stand Alone*, 1998) and *Irréversible* (2001) which belong to this Rape-Revenge Films category. These recent films have been noticed by the contemporary critics. For example, Douglas Keesey and Eugenie Brinkema co-wrote an essay on Gasper Noé by using Deleuze's movement-image theory in *Studies in European Cinema* and *Camera Obscura*. Eugenie Brinkema also used Deleuze's movement-image to re-interpret *Seul contre Tous* and *Irréversible*. Although these articles are still mainly concerned with gender topics, they gradually created leeway amidst film study and began to take a serious look at B films. Irina Makoveeva, for another example, wrote an essay to analyze the image of raping women in early Russian movies. In her interpretation, those female bodies are raped because of the violence and brutality of the country instead of that of gender inequality which made the films as no less symbolic than other serious films. Thus, female revenge films can have a historical or even symbolic phase to address, depending on the criteria used to discuss them.

However, only a few people in Asia try to discuss revenge films seriously, even though in literature, a scholar like David Der-wei Wang has studied Chinese pulp novels—*The Monster That Is History* (2004), indicating that “It (Wang's thesis) extends its arguments between two related axes: history and representation, modernity and monstrosity” (p. 3). His treatment to un-canonical Chinese literature in the modern era (after 1949) is similar to what Makoveeva has done to Russian violent films. Therefore, an imitative step to examine some of the above-mentioned Asian movies that transformed women avengers is taken in this paper. Beyond being sexually assaulted, they can be linked in a historicity that runs underneath a bizarre East Asia chronotop

to argue that even the B films are part of a whole become a byproduct that constitutes an axis of consumerism and reformist intent. Such films pave the ways for repression of an East Asia social order that seems conservative on the surface, but monstrous in its essence, just as David Der Wei Wang's (2004) interpretation of novels, "the monstrous is invoked as an objective correlative, so to speak, to the human account of past experience, registering what is immemorial and yet unforgettable in Chinese collective memory, and cautioning against any similar mishap in the future" (p. 7). Women's revenge is a reaction to such a "past experience" and "collective memory" which ironically let public revisit the painful object that has been harmed even as they demolish the devil of the molesting monsters.

Japanese Revenge Film by Toei Studio

As mentioned that "pink violence" is the answer made by Japanese film industry to television in the previous sections. Japanese film scholar Toguchi Naofumi (2009) stated:

Since 1958, the appearance of television and other means of entertainments had changed the mode of production in films. The decline of the audience caused the big film companies like Taiei to close, and very naturally Nikkatsu studio decided to turn into porno lines and this decision had shocked the whole film industry. Even though at that time Toei was not on the verge of re-directing into porno, they made more and more violent films. Toho, on the other hand, started to shoot films contained much sex and violence. (p. 13, trans. by the author)

It is clear that the re-direction into violence and sex is thought to be the elixir for the film companies to survive. Women's revenge films, due to their depiction of sex and violence, satisfied those filmmakers' desire (and the audience's as well) to choose the desirable projects. The first film Toei made was *Les Vierges du Shokun*, a dramatic period film with additional sex scenes to exploit the female bodies. Because of its success, Toei decided to make more of those movies even though this film does not belong to a typical female revenge category, so it should not be dismissed in the discussion.

Going Pink With *Les Vierges du Shokun*

This trial film proved that choosing to make erotic film was a correct path for Toei. Because of this film, the two film producers, Okada Shigeri and Amao Genji decided to expand the erotic line, which Toei had never tried in the past, and they started recruiting young beauties to cast in such films. The director Ishii Teruo thereby established his peculiar campy status because of this film. Japanese critics even gave a name of Ishii's works at this time called "Ishii's Bizarre Sex Films (石井輝男异常性爱路线)".

Les Vierges du Shokun's story is about a general who tries to win his beloved but stubborn concubine's heart. Tsunayoshi is a handsome general of Tokugawa period who thinks he can conquer every woman he wants. For example, he plays a lot of sex games with his concubines and lives a lascivious life, including letting all his concubines dance nude to please him. But one of his concubines, Mistu, is reluctant to be the slave of Tsunayoshi; therefore, he tries every gimmick to win her heart. At the same time, one of his loving wives, Someko, is being blackmailed to have an extra-relational affair with Tsunayoshi's best friend. Tsunayoshi becomes terribly troubled by knowing this. To relieve himself over loss, he decided to rape his loyal servant's wife as compensation. But because of her loyalty to her husband, the woman and her husband both kill themselves, leaving a letter to tell Tsunayoshi to repent over his fallen deeds. At the same time, Mitsu blinds herself and becomes a female monk in a temple. Tsunayoshi suddenly loses all the important people he needs. He is terribly sorry for what he has done, but suddenly his wife, Nobuko, kills him with a dagger. In fact, his wife is a spy sent by Tsunayoshi's political rival. Being once a great general who played around all kinds of

women, Tsunayoshi ironically dies in the hand of a woman.

Les Vierges du Shokun is in fact a moral play with some additional sex scenes. Compared to the later female revenge films, this one stands out in its aesthetics. Two overhead shots of the rape scene are shown as Figures 1 and 2 below:



Figure 1. Overhead shot in the rape scene.



Figure 2. Overhead shot in the rape scene.

The two characters originally came from different directions but later they lie together. When viewing this scene in motion, one is immersed in its melancholic atmosphere. Compared to the most revenge films later, *Les Vierges du Shokun* is a beautiful film in which the director develops cinematic artistry to avoid making a pure “porn” film. In early such films, sex is not the sole concern. This is type associated with regular feature-length films. Besides, there is a moral teaching here—to live a debauched life results in final damnation. Everything you have in life will fade—only Mistu, who advances: She becomes a female monk, sequestered and estranged from the crazy secular world.

At the time, committees within the Japanese Censorship Administrative had trouble deciding how to rate this film. Some erotic movies were banned while others protested for the right of the audience to see such movies. News reports of Tokubai Shinbun on July 20 in 1968 disclose the debate:

No matter for what reason, *Les Vierges du Shokun* should be taken as a breakthrough. The censorship this time has allowed such film which was over the edges. It shows that some of the committee members still considered this film have some artistic merits; therefore, we shouldn't adhere to censorship that strictly. (p. 9, trans. by the author)

Some people still applauded Toei for making a film combining Japanese historic drama, lavishly fabulous sets and a good soundtrack.

Thus, *Les Vierges du Shokun* is not a cheap porn flick which shows that Toei was still trying to hold onto their historical drama lineage in order not to lose their devout fans. After its success,³ Toei began to produce their sensual films, that is, their pinky violence series. From then on, in one series after another, the female yakuza, female prisoner, and so on, all suddenly embark on taking off their clothes on the screen, one of the most representative works of director Suzuki Norifumi, *Delinquent Elder Sisiter Legend: Ocho, Inonoshi, Ika* (1973) is going to be discussed to find the meaning of these Japanese female avengers.

Japanese Female Yakuza: *Delinquent Elder Sisiter Legend: Ocho, Inonoshi, Ika*

The film is director Suzuki Norofumi's work that starred Ike Reiko in 1973. It is centered on a story of a vengeful woman in a traditional period drama. Her father died in her childhood and left some chess with marks of cho (butterfly), inonoshi (swine) and ika (deer) to remind her to take revenge for him in the future. She grows up to be a female yakuza, with a nickname called "Cho" (butterfly). One day, she bumped into a man called Syunosuke who tries to assassinate a politician, and she saves him latter from being killed. At the same time, Cho also attempts to save another girl, Yuki, from being sold into brothel. In the process, she encounters Kurokawa, the head of the yakuza group who controls Yuki, has a duel with Cho by using an English woman in a casino. Syunosuke comes to the duel and accidentally finds out who Cho will challenge, Christina, his former lover. Christina lost the game, but yakuza Iwagura does not want to release Yuki, thus another fight is about to begin.

The whole film is intensely exciting, and could sufficiently be regarded as a great entertainment. Cho is a woman yakuza who helps the poor and fights with bad politicians. This is the traditional story in a yakuza film, but in this one, numerous scenes of fighting, sex, and the blond foreign star competing with Ike Reiko are quite astonishing. The most exciting sequence is a fighting scene in a bath, which later has been re-used in other revenge films. The slow motion gives the gore and daubed with blood in a sense of lyrical emotion. It is totally campy and one of the fans in Taiwan states in his blog (2011):

In fact the most exciting are still the two sequences of one-fight-many. Certainly the fighting skills are not that groundbreaking, but the mis-en-scene had a lot to play with, especially when we see Ike Reiko stripped her clothes while fighting. It is really a smash to look at. Not long after the film starts, the fighting in the bathroom will definitely open the audience' eyes. Ike Reiko fights from the bathroom to the snowy garden while reflecting the blood on the blade of the sword; it is really a combination of eroticism and violence. In the end, the revenge scene is also very exciting. Half-naked Reiko is showing in the rain of the blood of her enemies.

Other note-worthy part regarding to the film is that they hired Christina Lindberg from Sweden to play the supporting role. She also plays another woman avenger in the films *They Call Her One Eye (aka. Thriller: A Cruel)* (1972). In fact, Lindberg's acting is so-so, but that is not the point because her major scenes in the film are the sex scenes, including one that depicts the eroticism between two lesbians. (Trans. by the author)

The comments this fan wrote reveal all male audience can enjoy from this movie, but at the same time, interesting elements this kind of work introduces are the combination of nudity and sex. So, even though the major critics did not like Toei's erotic production, there is no denying that female revenge films still have

³ What is noteworthy here is that at that time certain Japanese critics such as Takahashi Eiichi had expressed their negative opinion, thinking that Toei, one of the largest film companies, was going too far. He comments in *Kinema Junpo* June Issue in 1969 that "Toei has been running at the risk of disgracing our culture by making these movies. They will, on the other hand, harms Toei company itself" (p. 128).

something to show—nudity, violence, and weird aesthetic beauty which is lucidly seeable from the DVD covers as Figure 3.



Figure 3. DVD covers of *Delinquent Elder Sister Legend: Ocho, Inonoshi, Ika*. Adapted from amazon.co.jp.

Female revenge movies do not go beyond the criteria of yakuza films. This one is no exception as traces of “benevolence and justice” as the theme in the film still pervade like any other male-centered yakuza films, for example, Fukasaku Kinji’s *War Without Justice*, which came out almost at the same time. According to an interview with Suzuki Norifumi, who talked about those movies of the 60s to 70s against the backdrop of Japanese society:

This is a time of killing, challenging authority and fighting with the system. The student movement was of its peak and this atmosphere permeated into cinema, so that we made films with violent elements just like the anti-authoritarian, anti-moral and anti-educational ambience we were making the films under. (Sukisaku, 1999, p. 103, trans. by the author)

In other words, the new female revenge films are not only an elixir for the film company to avoid bankruptcy, but also reveal the pendulous Japanese society at that time. It was a time when Japanese students were fighting for freedom from the military control of the American army encamped in many places in Japan. One of the most famous examples is the Yasuda Koza incident, in which a large group of students fighting against Japan-America Anppo treaty were arrested. The students then started to join forces more to show the government their discontent by marching and quitting class in a collective action.

The anarchism ideal is similar to the yakuza film in that the central character is fighting against a dark society. So these movies are actually guided by the desire for freedom. Apparently, the depiction of sex implies sexual exploitation, but it is truthful to what happened in the society, in terms of David Der Wei Wang’s interpretation as “monstrosity”.

From the perspective of film etymology, *Les Vierges du Shokun* and *Delinquent Elder Sister Legend: Ocho, Inonoshi, Ika* can be considered as a sub-line of the major studio’s re-direction towards film-making about monstrous Japanese society. Until recent years, there is still new series produced, such as *The New Wives of the Mafia* (2013) displayed in Figure 4. The problem could not be portrayed as they happened in the society. The methods break the rules of traditional film making and successfully appealed to a different fan base until

10 years later when the appearance of porn video supplanted them. However, it is also sad that no company carried on, so such female avengers dissipate into films of other genres and seem unable to persist in their own right.



Figure 4. The Japanese film company is still making the woman-centered *The New Wives of the Mafia* (2013).

Women's Revenge Films in an Intra-cultured Hong Kong

The female revenge films in Japan are in fact hybrid of yakuza films and the pink films popular during the 60s to 70s. In Hong Kong, women's revenge films are associated with a famous director, Li Han Hsiang, with erotic films such as *Mood for Love* (1977) and *Golden Lotus* (1974) (see Figure 5). The reason for Li's choice to shoot erotic movies is the box-office downfall of Shaw Brother Company.

As in Japan or in any part of the world, sex was always considered to be the solution for sinking profits. As a leading director of this time, Li Han Hsiang tried to adapt classic stories from Chinese novels (such as *Jin Ping Mei*) or the stories in *Daecameron* to make sex films. Tragic realist sequences also abound, especially in the second part of *Mood for Love*, is lifelike in its depiction of the whore houses of old Peking.

But because of the more conservative social atmosphere, Li's erotic description of sex is inexplicit. Li himself commented that his films are, in comparison with western porn, "too mild". He uses metaphors like the swaying beds, women's moaning facial expressions to carry out his eroticism instead of presenting over-the-edge nudity graphically. In a word, his erotic movies are more thought-provoking than orgiastic.



Figure 5. From Li's *Golden Lotus*.

One of the most interesting features of such films is that the directors like to use criminal stories, like rape cases from the news to make films, such as *The Criminal* (1977) series. This is very peculiar because Hong

Kong's is a multi-cultural society in which there were colonists from Britain, Chinese habitants, and other minorities like the refugees from Mainland China after the culture revolution. Therefore, the revenge stories spawned an array of multi-lateral meanings in a farrago of bad guys and victims living together, but in the format of commercial genre films whose crime sequences are meticulously exaggerated. *The Kiss of Death* is one example.



Figure 6. *Big Bad Sis*: factory girls vs. male mafia.

The leading actress of *The Kiss of Death* is Chen Ping, a Taiwanese girl who went her showbiz to Hong Kong. Because of her appearances in such erotic flicks like *The Kiss of Death* and *The Sexy Killer*, she was then promoted by Shaw Brother as the Company's favorite sex star. Then she also co-starred in Li Han Hsiang's *Golden Lotus*. To gain her fame with her sultry body, there are no grounds for irrelevant people to judge what she did. The fact remains that few years after she went to Hong Kong, her career in Taiwan was finished by the government, who took vengeance on her and other Taiwanese girls, alleging them as "the disgrace of our country".

The Kiss of Death was produced under a multi-culture (a Taiwanese actress starred in the most westernized Chinese society environment in the 70s) with a story that tells how a girl on her way home was raped by a mafia group. She arrives with shame, but her parents did not comfort but blamed her. To seek revenge, she goes to work in a bar where she learns Kung Fu from the owner. Here follows a series of revenge sequences in which she fights with mafia. She dies in the final duel.

The narrative of this film conforms to a conventional pattern: molestation, quest for help, taking her revenge and finally winding up a self-sacrifice. The theme of such movies lies in the costs of borne by the victimized woman. If she wants justice, she has to persist and tolerate all the pains of the process to achieve her goal. The segments are successive stage of revenge. The love affair here with the bar boss is the only melodramatic part. They together planned how to take the revenge and then practiced Kung Fu and gambling. In the erotic scene where she has sex with her boss, she says: "The venom in my body can be healed, but the venom of my heart can never be appeased." Therefore, the logic can only be that revenge is the only way to relieve the pain of a victim.

The Kiss of Death did not get positive critical review whereas most of the press focused on Chen Ping's sex appeal more than anything else. In other words, the female revenge film itself is "monstrous" in as much as

the heroine is still being consumed and exploited. Most went to see the film for the fakery appeal of the actress. On this point, sex and violence predominate in *The Kiss of Death* which offers little comparison with the two Japanese films discussed above. However, the traces of the darkness of society are no less realistic than the other two films. The alley of the night, the pub's hippy music and endless factories symbolized the vileness of Hong Kong. But even though this film was the third most profitable film of 1973, people seemed not care about those possible deeper meanings.

Furthermore, the textile factories in the film, the houses of laboring classes', and the red-light districts in Hong Kong were realistically depicted. If Suzuki Norifumi is a representative of the female yakuza movies in Japan, Ho's *Kiss of Death* (see Figures 7-9) should be considered as the start of other female revenge movies that disclose the dark side of the life in Hong Kong during the 1970s. Hong Kong is an important production place and exporting harbor in Asia, and in the 70s, it was home to many textile and toy factories. With its on-location scenes and exotic bars, one sees the extremes of culture that co-existed in Hong Kong.



Figure 7. The female characterization before her transformation—timid and unconfident.



Figure 8. The transformation of the protagonist in *The Kiss of Death*.

The transformation of the female character is necessary for her actions of revenge and a “masculinization” employs a new phallus envy. Vengeance wrongs the pain will only proceed via a reformation of phallus envy which re-enforces the concepts of phallus envy. This characteristic is ironic, but correlates with what David Der Wei Wang (2004) states about the violence of literature:

in the wake of “scar writing”—a powerful literature indicating the Culture Revolution, as critics such as Liu Zaifu have pointed out, Chinese literature under the auspices of leftist aesthetics started out as “a literature against violence” and became mere “literary violence”. (p. 4)

The observation about post-revolutionary Chinese literature can also apply to the commercial feature-length films. *The Kiss of Death* typifies how a “film against violence” itself becomes a “violent film”. It alludes to sexual harassment, violence, and even the fear of the transmission of venereal disease in a context of foreign colonization.

The relationship is pressed to extremity. In the case of *Kiss of Death*, the bar boss falls in love with the

vengeful woman, but how can this plot distinguish itself from the idea of it is whether a real kindled love affair or is another male-centered exploitative adventure? In this way, the relativism of love and hatred relationship in women's revenge films exists predominantly in every relationship.



Figure 9. Attack to the phallus.

Susan Lord (2006) states that “Feminist anxieties about constructing vengeful heroines through rape-revenge narratives in the 1980s circle around eroticizing rape scenes and, hence, perpetuating a victim syndrome while masquerading the revenge as female agency” (p. 261). It is what *Kiss of Death* enacts and brings into realization. Yet, violence against violence is a way to counter exploitation. The cliché has not changed, and seems to show that monstrosity exists in both literature and other media forms.

Campy Against Censorship: Taiwan's Social Realist Female Revenge Films

The early 80s is an important transition for the film industry in Taiwan. Before that, patriotic films (*The Battle for the Republic of China*, *Magnificent 72*) were at their peak and Qiong Yao's romantic films were also still popular such as *The Marigold*. For fans of the martial art movies, there were still good ones coming out at that time. The only new genre born around this time is so-called Social-Realist films, which in fact has no significant differences from the criminal films, but for a claim that they adapt real criminal cases.

As these trends continued into the late 1970s, mafia control over the film industry became increasingly worse. According to professor Lu Fei Yi (1998), the film industry at this time was:

While Taiwan New Films were trying to change the past pattern of filmmaking, with the instable social condition, the atmosphere in the film industry also became a chaotic one. After 1985, the condition of mafia control over directors, stars and distribution greatly troubled the government so that the Administration of News and Media had to admonish filmmakers to behave themselves, and not cause social troubles anymore. (p. 230)

This is the time when female revenge films start to flourish. *Queen Bee* and *Underground Wife* will be provided as examples to see the troubles behind them.

***Queen Bee's* Representativeness of Female Revenge Films**

Since Lu Hsiao Fen's *Shanghai Profile* succeeded in 1980, women in the role of avengers in films had become extremely popular. Several epoch-making films were highly profitable, including *Queen Bee*. The actress, Lu I Chan was not only beautiful, sexy but also able to fight. Receiving an interview from *TV Daily* in Taiwan, she revealed how difficult it was to play the role of queen bee because almost all the locations are in the wild country, factories, and the remains of old buildings, and the shooting was done mostly in terrible material conditions, which caused her many bruises. From this interview, it is lucidly revealed that these female actresses do not only sell their prettiness—they have to sacrifice for the roles they play.



Figure 10. The sequel: *Queen Bee Revenge*.

However, critics did not seem to appreciate these things. The famous Taiwanese film scholar, Jiao Hsiung Ping (1985) had commented: “The censorship is biased to pass the extremely sexually exploitative *Queen Bee* (see Figure 10), but ban some other good films. How unfair it is!” (p. 65, trans. by the author). It is plain that those critics prefer films that have serious themes. But one can argue that the audience who went to see *Queen Bee* did not really care about whether there is a serious theme or not. The critics’ point of view is quite different from the normal market concern of both filmmakers and audience. It will be very unfair to judge the significance of a film like *Queen Bee* from the standpoint of film critics. It will be meaningful if such examination can be put in a large social context. For example, how can those female avengers be not considered as the victims of the monstrosity of the consumerism? A further criterion lies in whether the heroines adhere to the spirit of “justice and benevolence” which will rationalize their unlawful behavior with acceptability.

In fact, during the early 80s, there was a rising phenomenon of women who dared to be autonomous, which exercised prolific appeal in popular culture. In films, *Gloria* (1980) becomes a culture icon for this period of stressing the power of women. In Taiwan, Lu I Chan could be the representative feminist character at this time even though in her films, she still needs men’s help to get her revenge in the story. The female essence does not exist without sexual inequality; however, how women can survive in a world full of such inequality is more important. In *Queen Bee*’s case, “fuel and hatred must be erased so that your heart’s scar will be erased.”⁴ What distinguishes her from the previous female images like Bridgette Lin (林青霞) or Lin Feng Jiao (林凤娇) has already been so clear to see—women should not merely be tame, soft, and totally relying on love. For *Queen Bee*, sexual assault and hatred are the sources of drive that spur her to challenge the dominant patriarchal society.

Queen Bee in fact adapted the story from a Japanese antecedent film in the 50s. It is about a girl’s revenge against a mafia group that raped her sister. In order to be able to get her revenge, she goes to see Master Fan, who is the head of another mafia group but does a lot of good things for the people who are being mistreated by the bad mafia. After training to becoming Master Fan’s female disciple, she starts her journey of revenge. However, she finds out the guy who controls her sister’s rapists is the father of her ex-boyfriend whom she recognizes in a casino duel when her ex-boyfriend appears with his father.

⁴ The film’s gang master, Master Fan’s, famous line to Queen Bee when he gives her the tattoo (see Figure 11).

Queen Bee's duel with the man takes place in the remain of an old building. She uses out of her bullets and it seems that her enemy will kill her. Suddenly, her ex-boyfriend jumps out from the wall and is shot by his own father's last bullet. Now, the loved object from both sides is sacrificed. His father then kills himself, and Queen Bee is arrested by the police.

In terms of its story, *Queen Bee* ends up with a tragedy even though the revenge is reasonable. It ends up with the death of the loved one which becomes the price she has to pay for her revenge. On the other hand, she must rely on a man's (Master Fan) help to realize her revenge plan. In the scene where she is tattooed by Master Fan, he tells her to think of "something more painful than receiving the tattoo pricks". The whole tattooing process is like a therapy that heals her old pain. The master uses the needles of tattoo to cure her pain in her memory. The only thing she has to keep in mind is that she should never be taken over by her hatred. The only solution for getting even with her enemy is to remove the pain in the heart. It is an admonition to inscribe in her heart that revenge is never the solution to problems in the unfair world, but it is only a means of getting even for the mistreatment that will incur to a vicious circle that never ends. For example, although Queen Bee succeeds in getting revenge for her master and her sister, she loses love that might bring her the real happiness. Should it also be a kind of compensation?



Figure 11. The tattooed Queen Bee.

In terms of paternalistic power in *Queen Bee*, it cannot really answer the question whether women could compete with men. Revenge is only an action on the surface. But as to answer to how to escape the grave of the male-dominated world, women's revenge films seem unable. The only solution to end all these vengeful circles is decided according to law because as a commercial film, it has to give a reasonable finale that will not irritate the authority in concern (the Administration of Media and News).

As the matter of a fact, there do exist female victims in the society, but one film or a genre film cannot give an answer to help them out. But at least, after a whole period in the 1970s, there are some new genre films creaked in the 1980s, even though they deal with social problems poorly. The crazy bee functions like what David Der Wei Wang's description of the monster in the history of Chinese popular fiction and to allude to the constraint of many social factors (censorship, audience' voyeuristic desires, a conservative yet economically booming society) that narrate an 80s synchronic violence, both on-and-off the silver screen in the society.

The *Underground Wife* on the Verge of Social Crisis

Besides Lu I Chan, another female avenger that conquered the box office is Chen Li-yun, who starred in *Underground Wife* and became well-known for this film for a few years until she died of alcohol addiction. The film company even re-released the film once around 1987.

Back to the basics, it had several similarities to *The Kiss of Death*,⁵ their stories both surround a raped woman and the following process to take revenge. In both films, there are love scenes where the heroines are with other men, but they end up tragically in the final fight with their enemies and the other surviving characters are arrested by the police. But in spite of the similarity in the stories, *The Kiss of Death* is about the complexity of Hong Kong's social scenes with the description of the factory working girls while *Underground Wife* aims mostly to de-Taiwanize; that is, to show the process of how the mafias use mischief to torture each other, not showing what is really happening in Taiwan's society.

Here lies the irony of the name "Social Realist", since most parts of the film are not realistic at all. As *Queen Bee* has received negative comments, and this point is no exception. The critic at that time comments on female revenge films:

These films show nothing more than the opportunistic minds of those filmmakers. These films have no reality in them. *Queen Bee*, *Deadly Darling* and *Woman's Revenge* can be named women's revenge film at most. They are not even qualified to be called Social Realist. (Liang, 1981, p. 10, trans. by the author).

In the eyes of these film critics or scholars, meaning or value is centered on film aesthetics, but 30 years later, these films conversely reflect the monstrosity of the critics, even if it is in a myopic form. Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1998) talks about Value/Evaluation:

The extent to which the value of literary works is "intrinsic" to them or a matter of "fashion," whether literary judgments can claim "objective validity" or are only "expressions of personal preference," whether there are underlying standards of taste based on universals of "human nature," and so forth. While such questions, formulated in one set of terms or another, have been central to Western critical theory for at least the past two hundred years, the past decade has witnessed the emergence of both significantly new perspectives on them and also dramatically transformed and expanded agendas for their exploration. (p. 177)

Literary judgments in Smith's words can be debatable no matter whether those judgments are made based on any "objective validity" or "personal preference". New forms of criteria should always be built up as criticism itself is always going through a self-transformation. In the case of the women's revenge films, early critics' comments on these female revenge films are no less literally extremely violent as what the films themselves are.

In the story of *Underground Wife*, the protagonist Tang Mei Ling, due to her acquaintance with her boss' many illegal matters, has been forced to be her boss' underground wife. The other male character, Lu Pin was on the run because he killed someone for his friend and then becomes a scapegoat for the murder. These two marginal characters cooperate together to fight against the mafia. All the consecutive plots in the film are the processes of taking revenge, but they also reveal a repression of pains caused by inequality and exploitation in the society (but again, not normally Taiwanese). In this sense, the film is never as "unrealistic" as what the critics commented. In fact, any genre film can capture some essences of social real life. The differences are the depth and the discussion. Hence, as Social Realist Films are always blamed for their violence, isn't this monotonous value system equally violent? At least, the appearance of Social Realist Films shows a phenomenon of Taiwan on a transition from singularity to pluralism.

⁵ According to a personal interview with the screen writer for this film, Yao Ching-kang, this film is an imitator to *The Kiss of Death*. But because of the strict censorship at that time, the nude scenes have been much toned down. In the first scene when the protagonist was raped, her lingerie and bra were not even being torn down, which is ridiculous in a way. But even so, with its ingenuous violence, *Underground Wife* had brought an immense profit for the film company at that time.

For example, Tang Mei Ling and Lu Pin are supposed to have a bright future originally, but because they meet some bad guys who try to molest or use them, they become the refugees from the society when one day they can get even with the people who mistreated them.⁶ In reality, the victims in the society may not get their revenge easily, but while people go to see a film like this, they could find a certain relief for their hatred. The bad guys, hypocrites, and the villains are finally killed. The audience' minds, therefore, tend to be appeased for a short period of time.

Thus, *Underground Wife* is intended to insinuate a world of hypocrisy, humanity's greed and selfishness under a masquerade of good appearances. The coarsely-made violent film seems to have an illogical paradox, for example, the police always show up in the end when all the characters are dead. Underneath that is it alludes to the fact that many despondent people in the society have no other way to get their revenge except via physical violence because real justice simply does not exist. Films, in short, are a convention that excerpts glimpses of society with additional emphasis on certain visual elements to attract the audience to go to see them. In this practice, film achieves some degree to social realism, but unfortunately, at the time of its release, governmental censorship disallowed *Underground Wife* to end without the intervention of police and in the finale of the film shows the words in caption to admonish people not to commit crime, which seems to be a cliché.

The two Taiwanese films, *Queen Bee* and *Underground Wife* are similar to Hong Kong's *The Kiss of Death* on account of their relationship with men. Men molest women in the film, but men are still the ones women can ask for assistance. Conversely, Social Realist Films indicate the world's gender issues are two-sided: Both men and women are the victims of the gender inequality. Mistreatments of women will not benefit men after all. The real social mechanism is exactly as cruel as what happened on the silver screen. By the time when Social Realist Films became a trend, behind the screen there were many cases of the real villains giving threats to the filmmakers or even the stars. It was a chaotic situation when all the people involved in this business desired to get benefits and perhaps these things foreshadow the cause of the death of Chen Li Yun.

All through the examination of study on the Social Realist Films, what is more regrettable is that the filmmakers usually only want to make profits out of it instead of thinking about how to develop a "campy touch" that can elevate them into a special kind of movies. Once again, it is not over exaggerated that they are the victims of a monstrous society in an age of monstrosity. The monstrosity crystallizes audience' viewing desires, the greed of opportunistic filmmakers who want to maximize benefits and finally torment the people who got involved in the production (business).

Although the film industry went down in the late 1980s and Social Realist Films came to an end in history, it was possible to expect Social Realist Films to gain special status like cult movies in the west. With time, Social Realist Films are born with the needs of society which is also a victim of the monstrosity of history.

Conclusion

Like David Der Wei Wang's reading on Chinese pulp fiction, after 30 years, those women's revenge films provide a different perspective to narrate history. In Japan, it was Toei which first introduced the market a different yakuza films and later influenced the similar production in Hong Kong and Taiwan. In history,

⁶ Mei-ling is a secretary who finds out about the fraud in the company. Since she knows the secret of the company, the boss threatens her not to tell the financial secret. She then unwillingly becomes the mistress of the boss. On the other hand, Lu Pin is a tramp in the society because he has been used by his former boss who then disposed him. Their love grows after Lu Pin saves Mei Ling when she tried to jump into the river. This is a story about empathy for others, even though the one who expresses it might also be in great trouble.

women's revenge films are the answers those film companies thought about to defeat the economic recession in the market. But culturally, because of the differences of each region's society, the representation of women's revenge also showed in different dress, so to speak, they took of their dress in quite various manners.

But what remains the same among them is the repression of the ideology. Censorship, critical condemnation and the hypocritical, but voyeuristic public all contributed to the many flaws of the drama, such as the bad guys are always to be caught or terminated at the end and those moral endings eliminated the probabilities to make the films an Asian type of cult classics. The visual excitement only emerges sensually but not logically which might account for the reason why people still watch them while literally abject those films. The history that is monster is clearly proven in this process as these films became the byproducts of a culture that seems so despicable but indispensable.

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