

The Research on the Representational Strategies of Femme Fatale in Contemporary Chinese Film-noir

Siwei Liu*

Department of English/East Asian Studies, McGill University, Montreal, Canada

*Corresponding author. Email: siwei.liu2@mail.mcgill.ca

Abstract. In 2014, Chinese director Diao Yinan's feature *Black Coal, Thin Ice* wins the Golden Bear Award for Best Director at the 64th Berlin Film Festival, sparking enthusiastic discussion on the prospect of the so-called 'Chinese film-noir'. Among the classic noir elements that sparked discussion in these films, the lethal woman, or the 'femme fatale' stands out to be the one that attracts the most attention. In the span of a decade, the Chinese femme fatale varies quite enormously in her role in the narrative and the gender implication her relationship with the noir hero represents. This essay will build on Mark Conrad's definition of film-noir, Jack Boozer's categorization of femme fatale, and Elisabeth Bronfen's tragic theory to analyze the construction of femme fatale in 2010s Chinese film noir. Equipped with these theoretical tools, this essay will focus on recent Chinese films-noirs and draw connections between their different representational strategy of the femme fatale to complete their noir narrative. This essay argues that while films like *Hunt Down* (2019) and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (2018) approaches the lethal woman in the classic androcentric or even misogynist way, *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014) and *the Wild Goose Lake* (2019) endows her with more subjectivity and agency while complicating her relationship with the noir hero.

Keywords: Film Noir, Chinese Cinema, Femme Fatale.

1. Introduction

To start with, all films chosen in this article are dubbed as film-noir or Chinese film-noir by the media and academics. Variety writer Scott Foundas acclaims Diao Yi'Nan's *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, describing it as a 'bleak put powerful Chinese film noir', where 'the spirits of Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain course through' [1]. However, there has not been a comprehensive theorization of film-noir's status in contemporary Chinese mainland film scene, especially after 2010. There are a few reasons for this. Firstly, film-noir itself is a tricky concept. Originally a French term which literally means 'dark film', the use of 'film-noir' was not recognized in the English world until the 1970s, with the help of Paul Schrader's *Notes on Film Noir*, the first influential overview of film noir's evolution [2]. Western Scholars have long debated whether film-noir should be considered as a genre by conventions of setting and conflicts such as western, gangster and musicals. Foster Hirsch and James Damico believes film-noir is a genre because of their shared use of a specific narrative, characterization, thematic concern, and visual design. For Hirsch, Noir is crime drama told in 'a mood of dislocation bleakness' [3]. For Damico, all film-noirs follow a specific narrative of self-destruction, usually concerning the femme fatale [3]. On the other hand, Paul Schrader denies film-noir's status as a genre and considers it to an assortment of films with specific emotional and stylistic undertones [4]. Schrader's argument is echoed by Robert Porfirio, who considers the noir undertone to be 'the mood of pessimism, loneliness dread and despair' [3]. Others believe film-noir could not be defined. Andrew Spicer and J.P.Telotte propose to turn away from the traditional methodology in genre studies. Instead of trying to theorize on the elusive 'essence' of films, Spicer considers film-noir to be 'a discursive critical construction' that evolves over time. For Spicer, film-noir is no more than a term scholars use to analyze films in retrospect, meaning there never existed a fixed criteria for what film-noir is [3]. It is precisely, as Telotte argues, film-noir's common tendency to reject traditional classical narrative trajectory and thematic concern, that distinguish certain films as 'noir' [3]. Tolette is mainly commenting on the nonchronological ordering of events, which is a much-favoured noir convention used to complicate the unattainable truth in noir narrative. Secondly, the emergence of the Chinese

film-noirs in the 2010s seem to be very limited, scattering around the decade, leaving very few cases to be studied.

However, the consensus these scholars have is to acknowledge the pessimistic existentialistic theme underlying the noir narrative. Mark Conrad, in his book *Philosophy of Film Noir*, recognizes such commonality and argues films could be considered film-noir if long as they exhibit a post-Nietzschean tragic sensibilities, which reflects humanity's mourning of lost values. Conrad points out the similarities between European existentialism and film noir, drawing connection between Camus 'The Stranger' and 1950s American film-noir such as *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Killer*, *the Touch of Evil*, and *Kiss Me Deadly*. Like the Stranger, these films all convey a sense of indifference, disorientation, and alienation in face of the loss of absolute truth [3]. Conrad believes this also coincides with Telotte's views on film-noirs as gateways to explore the problematics of seeing and speaking truth in a post-Nietzschean world. Elizabeth Bronfen focuses on the tragic sensibilities of the female characters in film noir, namely, the *femme fatale*. Bronfen believes the tragic sensibilities of film noir is sustained by what she refers to as the 'fatal misrecognition' by the noir heroes and the 'fatal recognition' of the *femme fatale* [5]. Evoking Stable Cavill's analysis on King Lear's tragic elements, Bronfen points out that tragedy is produced by actions, whose consequences at the time of being committed could not be predicted [5]. Thus, the problem of the inevitable fate is one's inability to recognize himself, his own fallibility, his own imperfection, 'the irrevocable limitedness' [5]. Even if the subject does recognize his own imperfection, the tragedy will occur if he or she chooses avoidance. In not recognizing himself or rejecting to see himself, the subject ignores the humane totality of the other, reducing the other to a mere indicator of the subject's limit of knowledge. Such inability to see himself and the belittlement of the other result in the fatal misrecognition, which Bronfen identifies in the characterization of classic noir hero. Opposite to this is the fatal recognition, which Bronfen identifies in the *femme fatale* troupe. Bronfen is mainly commenting on the high 'death drive' of classic *femme fatale*, who recognizes her fate of illegal conduct to be ultimate self-destruction but nevertheless accepts this fact as if it's her responsibility [5]. Such tragic acceptance derives from the *femme fatale*'s recognition that her freedom lies precisely in 'her embrace of the inevitability of causation' [5]. Bronfen's analysis on *femme fatale*'s tragic desires open the door for examining the gender dynamics and its social implications in the context of Conrad's argument on the existential theme of film-noir.

Building on Conrad's argument on the existentialism of film-noir, this essay will adopt Bronfen's tragic theory to analyze the construction of *femme fatale* in 2010s Chinese film noir. *Femme fatale* provides a perfect entry point to analyze the distinct tragic sensibilities of the Chinese-noir narrative. In examining how these films construct female subjectivity in their appropriation or revision of the *femme fatale* troupe, this article aims to analyze how they each contribute to the construction of the overall bleak and nihilistic narrative of each film, while challenging Chinese gender or familial stereotypes. The films adopted are not necessarily film-noir in the traditional sense, but they utilize noir elements. Every film is, as Spicer argues, essentially transgeneric, and there is no way to categorize and of no meaning to limit our perception of what they could be [3]. This is the true philosophy of film-noir, an assortment of films constantly revisiting and borrowing genre tradition to establish ones of its one. In doing so, film-noir presents, as always, fresh perspective and characterization of human emotions, helping us navigate the life in a post-Nietzschean world where no one has faith in anything anymore.

The fatal woman, or *la femme fatale*, has been a staple character for American film-noir for decades. Through years of development, the fatal woman has changed enormously both in her role in the noir narrative as well as her cultural implication in different socio-political context. Initially depicted as seductive and deceitful, the fatal woman in early American film noir projects the society's collective disillusionment in face of the post-war depression, male anxieties of woman's rise to power in the labour force and the destabilization of traditional marital relationship that ensued [6]. In proto-film-noir such as *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, the fatal woman is characterized by her desire for financial independence by way of manipulation through her sexual

initiative [6]. The classic femme fatale is usually portrayed in such ways to not arouse any sympathy but to only repulse audience because she is devised to be the opposite of the patriarchal economic and familial system, the destroyer of the male-dominating social order. In Neo-noir films, which coincides with the rise of Western feminism, the fate of the lethal woman becomes complicated. Often, she is revealed to be a victim of domestic and social abuse [6]. Before her scheme is in effect, the Neo-femme is already trapped in a troubled past, blurring the line between audience's sympathy and repulsion. A more modern representation of femme fatale sees her no longer in need of recruiting male accomplice with her lust to achieve her goals. In this careerist incarnation of femme fatale, she is powerful and resourceful enough to fulfill her desires [6]. The Chinese femmes-fatales, as the author will analyze in the following paragraphs, adopt and revise these troupes in their own unique ways.

2. The Hunt Down: Femme Fatale as the Villain

The Hunt Down, a 2019 crime drama, presents the iconography of a resourceful femme fatale that obtains phallic significance as the villain to both patriarchy and the social justice system, while her narrative function remains instrumental and objectified relative to the theme of the film. This strategy is characterized by its incorporation of the classic and post-1980s femme fatale troupes. The story revolves around a mysterious murder involving antiquities trafficking. The perspective of the story shifts from two officers, Shao Kuancheng and his rookie partner Zhao Hongyu. To investigate local news anchor Lin Baiyu, a suspect of antiquities trafficking, Zhao goes undercover Lin's current husband, history professor Wan Zhengang, who is Zhao's long lost biological father. The femme fatale, whom the film's gory opening almost immediately gives away, is Professor Wan's current wife and business partner Lin Baiyu. Originally a famous local news anchor, Lin Baiyu allegedly meets Professor Wan during a TV lecture recording session. Taking advantage of each other's job, they decide to get married: while Wan gets a green card to more and more TV lecture sessions, Lin takes advantage of his husband's connection in the paleontologist world and becomes involved with antiquities trafficking with Lin Tao, her secret lover and boss of a crime organization disguised as an artwork company.

The femme fatale, Lin Baiyu, is a projection of male anxieties and fears, a sexualized object that needs to be punished for the male fears to be vanquished. The characterization of Lin Baiyun is most akin to the American femme fatales in the 1980s, who as Jack boozier argues have developed a strong phallic potency following their identity as established social figure. Boozier argues that this femme fatale is often depicted as 'an intimidating character of sophistication, wealth and power' and does not necessarily rely on a man to conspire with for violence or for profit [5]. Already obtaining a successful career and economically independent, Lin has no dependence on men for survival. Before her mutually reciprocal relationship between Wan, she is already an established figure, both socially and economically. In fact, Wu may have benefited more from Lin than she did from him, as he is living in her house and leaving her with complete control of his public appearance. This results in an unequal power dynamic between Wan and Lin. Conspiring with her lover/crime partner, Lin expresses that she can make Wu cry or laugh whenever she likes. What's more, she is a trained shooting athlete, who is capable of lethal violence herself.

It is, however, precisely when she exercises her lethal capability that she dies of cold fire from Zhao, who budes in to arrest the couple. Interestingly, Lin's transformation into a femme fatale was not complete until the fallout of the negotiation with Wu, whose misogynist and hypocritical side was fully revealed and pushes her to complete the arc of femme fatale. Refusing to give in to Lin's ultimatum of suspending his account, Wan chokes Lin against the wall and describes her as 'the incarnation of evil' while revealing he too committed antiquities trafficking and didn't tell Lin because he despises her affair. In chaos, Lin grabs the gun and is taken by surprise by Zhao, and they shoot each other down. Lin's death is resulted from a misjudgment of what Professor Wan really craves. Lin's fatal misrecognition is that she believes Wan is only after the money but neglects her

very act of blackmailing is a gesture of provocation to the hypocritical patriarch hidden beneath Wan's civilized appearance. Such provocation requires retaliation, which results in the lethal tragedy that cost both Lin and Wan's daughter's life.

To the historically informed Wan, Lin is but of all the women who are destined to fail in their attempt to challenge the feudal patriarchy. Proclaiming that 'all women are but mirror for men', he blatantly expresses his misogynist view on women, placing them in the traditional patriarchal view of objectification [7]. To Wan, Lin is first and foremost a figure of sexual fetishism. When she faces downwards for Wan's message, it is her feet that the eyeline match close-up of Wan first sees. Moreover, Wan's disregard for woman also underlines his affair with Lin. In his account, he cheats on his original wife simply because she did not seem enthusiastic hearing about his academic findings while Lin does. While he feels no guilt for his own affair, Wan could not bear with Lin doing the same to himself [8]. This shows Wan's patriarchal male-centric nature, which places him as the absolute subject and women as the other, always sustaining an idealized image of a perfect self [7]. This is especially so when he chooses not to save his police daughter Zhao who he has been searching for most of his life. As Zhao Yanhua argues, like marital relation, his daughter is not a real person but a relation to reclaim and sustain to complete an ideal patriarchal image [8].

While punishing the misogynist patriarchal institution symbolized by Wan, the film still takes a male-centric approach to conclude the story. Besides being a fetishized mastermind, Lin has no other sympathizing qualities. Due to the lack of psychological portrayal, she is a villain aims to evoke repulse from both the patriarchal perspective the film punishes as well as the social justice system Wan's daughter represents. Her demise is applauded on and foreseeable. Moreover, the narrative is concluded in a way that motivates the male protagonist Shao to reenlist in the force at the cost of his comrade Zhao's death, which further affirms Lin in the periphery as the incarnation of social transgression. Even though she bears some elements Boozer finds in the neo-noir femme fatale, Lin's lack of selfhood classifies her to the more classic femme fatale, who exists only for men to hate and defeat.

3. Long Day's Journey into Night: Femme Fatale as the Constituent of Male Subjectivity

Similar to the Hunt Down, Long Day's Journey Into Night's femme fatale is also a projection and symbol for male anxieties. However, this femme fatale represents not a threat but a possibility for the noir-hero for self-resolution. The film follows Luo Hongwu, who returns home after his father's death and tries to find his old lover Wan Qiwen. Intercutting his tragic past with his present journey, the film ends its realist narrative at a cinema, where Luo rests to wait for his rendezvous with Wan Qiwen. There he falls asleep and leads the audience into the second half of the film, the dream narrative, which is presented in a spectacular one-hour long take. In his dream, he revisits some of his most tragic past and tries to find consolation.

Though very little scholars analyze this film in the perspective film-noir, Long Day's Journey Into night does fall into the film-noir spectrum, with its emphasis on personal narration, use of non-chronological ordering of events, expressionist lighting, the inclusion of a femme fatale. The use of first-person narration, non-chronological narrative and the highly personal dream sequence underscores an existential fear towards the reality. Assuming Luo's perspective, the inability to discern past and present extends into his dream, which makes ambivalent the boundary between reality and fantasy. The film also sees traces of post-Nietzschean philosophy, which evokes audience's reflection on the falsifying effect of memory and dream, as well as human's inability to reach to the ultimate truth [9]. Like the ultimate truth of reality, the femme fatale Wan is unattainable for Luo, so much she becomes a concept and a symbol for his self-reconciliation.

Although the realist part of the film sheds lights on Wan's subjectivity, her character becomes the base for Luo's dream and gives way to her reconstructed dream double 'Kai zhen', who ends up in a romantic relationship with him in his dream [10]. The femme fatale, Wan's destructive qualities lie

not in her pursuit for economic independence, but her desire for self-fulfillment and self-liberation. Sold to be the local gangster Zuo's lover as a juvenile delinquent, Wan seduces Luo to help her eliminate Zuo and regain her freedom. Declining Luo's request to leave Zuo's territory to form a new family, Wan aborts Luo's child and leaves without any notice. Wan is most like Boozer's Neo-noir femme fatale, whose destructive potential is pardoned by the victimization of her character. However, due to the non-chronological ordering of events and the fragmented narration from different characters, Kai Zhen is formed by Luo's memory as well as other's narration. This adds a sense of fabulation to Kai Zhen as well as Wan [11]. The cinematography affirms this, as Wan is somewhat fetishized in the realist part of the film. When Luo sees Wan for the first time, it was from a medium shot of her back, with her leg vaguely visible. Their first interaction started with Wan borrowing a light from him, holding a cigarette in her arm. Violently, Luo drags her head over and lights the cigarettes up. Now with her right face completely lit up like a profile shot, it is unclear if Luo is really interrogating or contemplating Wan's resemblance with his mother. The power relation has since been inverted as Luo reveals to Wan that she looks like his mother. It is at this moment Wan realizes Luo is someone she could use to her advantage. In the Freudian perspective, Wan becomes a fetishized image for Luo, a totality symbolizing both parental care and romantic desires [10]. The face and body of Wan would later return in his dream in the name of another woman named Kai Zhen, with whom his love persists in the infinite possibilities of the dream world. The fatal misrecognition of Luo is that he misrecognize Kai Zhen, the Freudian projection of his childhood trauma, with the subject for love. It is for this reason that he becomes captive of the gangster's hands and flees from the law. Whether or not Luo has found Qiwen, is left unanswered and perhaps the dream implies that the real Qiwen doesn't really matter to him anymore, as he has now found resolution in his dream.

4. Black Coal, Thin Ice: Femme Fatale as the Defiant Victim

Unlike the male-centered femme fatales from the *Hunt Down* and the *Long Day's Journey into Night*, whose narrative function only allows herself to be the subject of desire and anxiety for the male character, the femme fatales in Diao Yi'nan's film-noir are often depicted to be acting in her own agency and having subjectivity, no matter how limited that may be. Diao is famous for his efforts in localizing and revising classic western film noir traditions. Using local Chinese dialects and culture-specific locations such as deserted iron factories and the inner-cities, Diao ensures realism on the iconographic level [12]. Apart from this, he inherits the traditional film-noir characterization of the dialectics between the hard-boiled noir hero and the femme fatale while constantly revising and reworking it to make them relatable in the Chinese context [13].

Black Coal, Thin Ice tells the story of a washed-up former detective Zhang Zili, who sets out to investigate a serial murder whose modus operandi is similar to the one that resulted in his resignation from the police years ago. Now a traumatized drunken security guard, Zhang believes the widow Wu, wife of the victim Liang Zhijun, who was the first victim of this serial killing, is the nexus of all the murders. Every man that tries to approach Wu is brutally murdered. It is later revealed that both Wu and Wu's husband Liang are the perpetrators of manslaughter. After being blackmailed and sexually assaulted for ruining a wealthy man's jacket, Wu accidentally kills him. Liang agrees to take care of the body and fakes his death to escape investigation, becoming a 'living dead' who 'protects' his wife by killing every man she comes close with. What makes Wu a femme fatale is that she later turns Liang in and attempts to escape investigation by sexually seducing Zhang on the Ferris wheel. She gets arrested at the end and justice prevailed.

The central female character in *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, Wu is most similar to Boozer's Neo-noir femme fatale. In Boozer's argument, the Neo-noir femme fatale, despite perpetrating crime and enticing the noir hero to conspire with her, is characterized to be an active subject of audience's sympathy [6]. The Neo-noir femme fatale is often portrayed to be a victim of social and economic abuse. This trend coincides with the rise of feminism in 1980s and helps in some ways to explore the repressed female subjectivity and the patriarchal society that subjects them to their sufferings [6].

This is the case for Wu. As a working-class woman, Wu is marked by economic inability and when she is blackmailed by the wealthy businessman, she can't turn toward legal help because of her lack of social and economic relationship as a lower-class subject. The wealthy blackmailer symbolizes the greed of the social-economic system, where the powerful constantly squeezes the powerless for profit, which some scholar views as an epitome of the social context of capitalist China [14]. Secondly, she is subject to the mental control of her husband, who murders every man she comes close with in the name of love [13]. At first, this agreement is beneficial to Wu because his husband takes the suspicion of murder off her name. But it soon becomes a sadistic manipulation between a female body in the light and a male body in the dark, always lurking to regulate a part of her life and therefore confining her from becoming a real person [13].

It is worth noting that this does not mean she would be a complete person if her husband didn't subject her to his control. This is her first fatal misrecognition. The moment she committed manslaughter is the moment she has been forever cast away from her normal life as a law-abiding citizen. The fact that she will never be able to be truthful to any man or woman ever again, that she will have to weave new scheme and conspire to cover for her violent act of impulse means she has ceased to become a real person, but a fugitive. As detective Zhang approaches the truth and takes her to the ferris wheel to confront her with the truth, she resorts to her sexual appeal for one last chance to escape the law. Having acquiesced her sexual invite, Zhang nevertheless still turns Wu in and is readmitted into the police force. This is Wu's second fatal misrecognition. Whether her sexual invite is an act of true affection or of strategic purpose, she misunderstood her meaning to Zhang: she is Zhang's medal to a higher social and economic status as well as releasing his repressed physical sexual desire [15]. As some scholar points out, the film's characterization of Zhang is symbolic of the patriarchal anxiety and fear of being emasculated, in both socio-economic and domestic spheres [16]. Divorced, failed investigation that took his colleague's life, the murder essentially cost everything Zhang had, from his marital harmony, economically security to his elite social status. Zhang's hard-boiled acts stem not from the 'middle-class ethics' from the 1930s Hollywood film-noir, but from the determination to reclaim his male dignity and reascend the social ladder in a socio-economic system dominated by male patriarchs, who oppressed and will probably go on to oppress many more working-class women like Wu [16]. As Anne Denison argues, the type of tragic incident of Wu and Zhang only affirms the patriarchal system by presenting the femme fatale as a rupture and the fact she ultimately gets punished only affirms the tragic fact that that system of oppression still exists [17]. Diao, however, still presents a glimpse of hope at the end by having Zhang setting out fireworks in daylight (the Chinese title of the film translates as *Fireworks in Daylight*) for Wu as a sign of regret, commemorating whatever true affection they had for each other.

Wu represents a unique representational strategy to complicate female subjectivity and agency. Instead of being instrumental and subordinate to the narrative like the femme fatale in the *Hunt Down* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Wu is not only center to the noir enigma but is constantly exercising her agency to alter her course of fate. Through this process, the film sheds light on the oppressive patriarchal socio-economic system instead of overthrowing it, which ensured the mainstream success of this film. It is for this reason, *Black Coal, Thin Ice* is dubbed as a model for both critical and financial success.

5. The Wild Goose Lake: Femme Fatale as a Narrative Subject

Diao's latest award-winning film-noir, the *Wild Goose Lake*, also presents an intricate crime drama revolving around a femme fatale. After accidentally killing a police officer, desperado Zhou Zenong flees and tries to contact his estranged wife to report him for the bounty. Forced by local gangsters, streetwalker Liu Aiai becomes the liaison between Zhou and his wife, as well as various parties more concerned with bounty but less with his wife. Together on the run from the police the local gangsters. Zhou and Liu engage in sexual discourse, but Liu ultimately turns Zhou in for the bounty after he

eliminated the gangsters that runs her prostitution. The ending sees Liu sharing the bounty with Zhou's wife. The two hold hands and walk towards the camera with ambivalent facial expression.

Interestingly, the seductive and flirtatious Liu does not fall into any of Boozer's categorization of femme fatale. She is not a classic femme fatale who seduces the noir-hero onto the road to self-destruction, nor is she a neo-noir femme fatale because nothing about her past is revealed. Working as an illegal streetwalker, she has no correlation with the sophisticated and economically independent corporate femme fatale. This peculiarity owes to the unconventional narrative and characterization of the film. Firstly, Zhou, the 'noir-hero', is not a hero in the traditional sense. Zhou is an underground thief, the opposite of what social justice proclaims. The only thing heroic about Zhou is his death wish to ensure a wellbeing for his estranged wife. Secondly, unlike Phyllis from *Double Indemnity*, Liu does not have a strong death wish. On the contrary, it is Zhou who has a strong death wish. Characterised by a pessimistic tone towards future, Zhou oddly immediately gives up trying to flee from the police and begins devising how to make the most out of his destined demise. Transferred from the Western femme fatale to the noir-hero, Zhou's fatal recognition is essential to the tragic sensibilities of his character. It is his recognition of his own impending doom that pushes him on the road of self-redemption through ways of profiting his estranged wife [18]. It is also, ironically, this profiting plan at the cost of Zhou's life that disrupts the patriarchal underground gang economy he is involved in. Developing relationship with the seductive liaison Liu, his hope for life briefly returns as he takes a break from fleeing in a cabin, gazing at the newspaper reports of lively events, where he experiences hallucinations of the life that will soon become distant from him. It is nevertheless too late for him to revert the past.

Like Wu from *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, her survivalist mentality and class status deviate her from the classic or the power femme fatale in Boozer's categorization. Her lethal qualities are characterized by her willingness to do anything possible to survive [13]. After having sexual discourse with Zhou on the boat, she still turns Zhou in to the gangsters. This sinister act, however, seems to stem from not insidious purpose but for self-protection. It is reasonable that she would exchange Zhou for her own safety. Like Wu from *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, Liu is a marginal social agent who has no power against the oppression of patriarchal socio-economic system [13]. Their class status and gender constitute them as the marginalized 'other' of the society. As Du Liang argues, director Diao furthers his critique of the patriarchal capitalist logic by juxtaposing Liu's body with the neon-decorated inner city where the story takes place [19]. Positioned against a highly commercialized iconography of the inner city, Liu's identity as a streetwalker is symbolic of how patriarchal capitalism commodifies the female body, devaluing and dehumanizing the female subjectivity [19]. Such argument could find its echo in Liu and Zhou's surrealistic encounter with a singing head in a cheerless circus. The singing head, played by a woman, sings in a highly constrained and twisted manner whenever someone tosses money in. This parallels Liu's identity as a streetwalker and becomes a reflection with which she sees her own dilemma and feels the need to do anything possible to break free from such oppression.

Withholding her backstory, the film also prevents her from becoming a typical neo-noir femme fatale, whose destruction stems from social or parental abuse from the past. Some argue that this narrative choice dehumanizes Liu, contradicting the film's own critique of the commodified female body by instrumentalizing her instead of exploring her subjectivity, but it is exactly through this omission of her past that highlights her change of mind after the event of the story. Both Zhou and Liu are characters without backstory, but this doesn't hinder the film's exploration of the complex human emotions. Diao's own words may respond perfectly to such criticisms. In an interview, Diao expresses that he hopes to portray characters not through dialogues but through their actions. 'Actions constitute a man', says Diao [20]. In the case of the *Wild Goose Lake*, by withholding character backstory, Diao forces audience to follow and engage with the characters in their purest ways possible and leaves the interpretation open.

Participating in this event with different motivation and barely know each other, Zhou and Liu slowly develop an untypical bond. Such bond, identified by Qi Wei as motivated by 'Strange Affects', oscillates between friend, comradery, and romantic subject [16]. In a Deleuzian perspective, such

affects could not be defined or categorized but they decide commands human actions. Indeed, both social outcasts, they find similarities in each other [16]. Due to the flaneur nature of their 'occupation' (streetwalker and motorbike thief), they are equipped profound geographic knowledge of the city, 'like professional cartographers' [19]. While their bodies can relatively move freely around the city, their internal state is subject to control or restrain of the social institution [19]. Following this reading, their sexual intercourse on the boat, as Liu Juan argues, is not symbolic of the blossom of a romantic relationship, but instead symbolic of a bond of trust formed between two marginal social agents wrestling to survive [12]. This bond is briefly broken when Liu betrays Zhou and turns him in to the local gangsters for her own survival. It is reestablished and strengthened when Zhou saves Liu from being sexually assaulted. Moved by Zhou's efforts and character, Liu eventually fulfills his wish and shares the bounty with his wife. In this way, the film reverts traditional use of female characters as an instrumentalized device to motivate the noir-hero reflect himself or the society. Rather than standing in as only a projection of male desire or the narrative other that serves only to characterize the male noir-hero, Liu is the narrative subject who takes initiative and decision for her own good and subjectivity, as she surprisingly shares the bounty with Zhou's wife when she could've had it all for herself [18]. In transplanting the fatal recognition of the femme fatale onto the noir-hero, Diao revises the noir conventions to allow more agency and subjectivity for the female character, endowing her with increasingly more significant role in the narrative.

6. Conclusion

In this essay, the author has examined the different representational strategies for the troupe of femme fatale in recent popular Chinese film-noir. After tracing the critical discourse surrounding film noir and femme-fatale, I adopted Bronfen's tragic theory and Boozer's categorization of femme fatale to analyze the characterization of lethal woman. There are mainly two representational strategies employed. While the first strategy, as shown in the *Hunt Down*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, adheres to the classic androcentric femme fatale troupe and projects the male anxieties, the second complicates the female subjectivity as shown in *Black Coal*, *Thin Ice* and the *Wild Goose Lake*. The villainous Lin Baiyu and the mysterious Wan Qiwen are rendered as the female other subordinate to the noir hero's subjectivity, who symbolizes for the projection of the male desire and anxieties. Both Wu Zhizhen and Liu Aiai exercise their limited physical freedom to level their power dynamic to break free from the patriarchal control. The diversity of the representational strategies showcased in these films exhibits the salient appropriation and revision of the Western film noir tradition. Constantly challenging genre tradition, this creative innovation perfectly testifies the non-conformist nature of film-noir, a theme that finds its echo in the Nietzschean philosophy holds scared by the noir convention. Future research can look beyond the scope of contemporary 2010s mainland Chinese film-noir and extend to Taiwan cinema, Hong Kong cinema, and the Chinese diaspora cinema abroad. An analysis on the different representational strategies of these cinema would shed light on a more systematic and universal understanding on the gender relation and the film noir revision in the broader Chinese context.

References

- [1] Scott Foundas, Film Review: 'Black Coal, Thin Ice'[EB/OL], 2014-02-13[2022-10-12]. <https://variety.com/2014/film/reviews/berlin-film-review-black-coal-thin-ice-1201099676/>.
- [2] Naremore J, *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*, Updated and Expanded Edition[M], 1. Berkeley: University of California, 2008:4,15-16.
- [3] Conrad M, *The Philosophy of Film Noir*[M], 1. Lexington: the University of Kentucky, 2005 :7-22.
- [4] Schrader P, notes on film noir[J], *Film Comment*, 1972(1):8-13.
- [5] Bronfen E, *Femme Fatale: Negotiations of Tragic Desire*[J], *New Literary History*, 2004, 35(1):103-116.

- [6] Boozer J, THE LETHAL FEMME FATALE IN THE NOIR TRADITION[J], JOURNAL OF FILM AND VIDEO, 1999/2000, 51(3/4):20-35.
- [7] Tan, S. Gender Gazing·Patriarchal Desires·Mutation of Humanity[J], AudioVisual Arts Magazine, 2021(10).
- [8] Zhao, Y. ,the Hunt Down and Genre Studies[J], Movie Literature, 2020(747).
- [9] Ren Y, Long Day's Journey Into Night—— The Dream Construct and Tragic Sensibilities[J], Media Now, 2020(12):84-87
- [10] Deng T, The Return to the Self: A Psychoanalytic Analysis of Long Day's Journey Into Night [J], Zhenjiang Advanced Professional School Journal, 2021(34).
- [11] Jiang Y, The Dream Narrative in Long Day's Journey Into Night [J],Classic Admiration, 2022(23).
- [12] Liu, J., Lighting the Night: discussing modelling languages and aesthetic ideas in film noir with Wild Goose Lake's Dong Jinsong[J], Film Arts, 2019(4):138-143.
- [13] Xiang, L., Diao Yi'nan's Female Characters from the Feminist Perspective[D],Inner Mongolia Normal University, 2022.
- [14] Shen C, The Auteur and the Industry--in the Case of Diao Yi'Nan [J], Sichuan Opera, 2019(12):36-42.
- [15] Lan Jia,Space, Power and Mutation—an Analysis on Diao Yi'Nan's Characters[J], Western Television, 2019(23):3-5.
- [16] Qi W, Strange Affect and the Narrative Force of Crime Drama in Diao Yi'Nan's Films[J], Contemporary Cinema, 2020(9):53-57.
- [17] Dennon A. The Emergence of the Feminist Fatale in American Film Noir[D]. Central Washington University, 2017.
- [18] Duan X, The Wild Goose Lake: Tragic Sensibilities and the Freedom of Expression of the Underdog[J], Film Literature, 2020(19):24-28.
- [19] Du. L ,The Emotional Cartography of Diao Yi'nan's Films [J], Contemporary Cinema 2020(9):47-52.
- [20] Xun.L,Yang.S,Remapping the aesthetic in The Wild Goose Lake—An Interview with Diao Yi'Nan[J], Film Art, 2019(4):60-65.