



# Raise The Red Lantern: The Cinematic Orient and Female Conflict

By Ashley Counts



# China at a Glance

- 2100 BCE – 1912 Dynastic Rule
- 1912-1949: Republic of China
  - Nationalists vs Communists
- September 21, 1949 : Communist Party Leader Mao Zedong proclaims the establishment of the People's Republic of China
- 1966: Cultural Revolution
  - Destruction of the 4 Old's
    - Old Customs
    - Old Culture
    - Old Beliefs
    - Old Behavior
- 1976 Mao's death
- 1976 – Present
  - Economic, Social, Cultural reforms

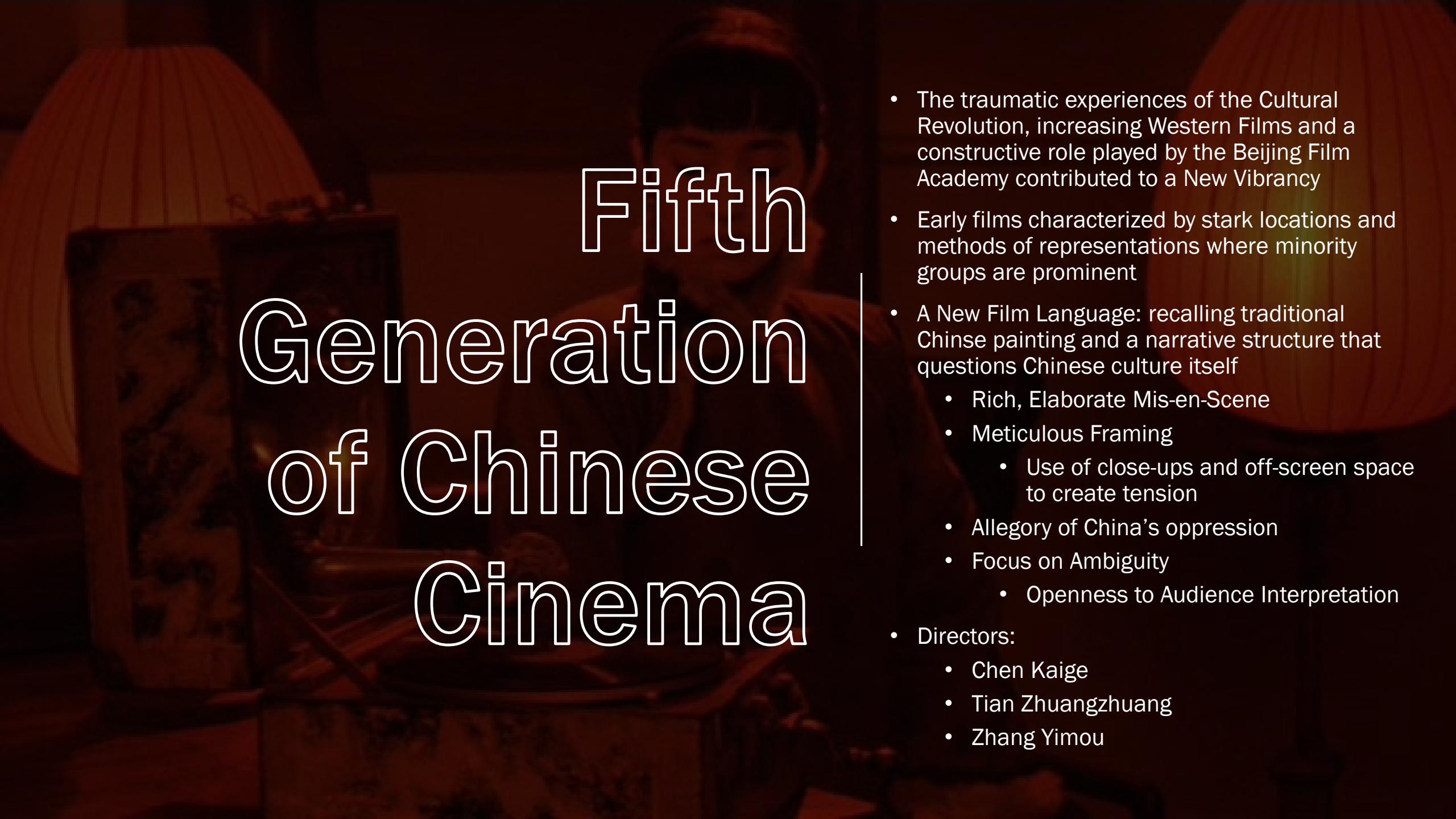


# Generations of Chinese Cinema

- 1<sup>st</sup> Generation: early pioneers of cinema at beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation: Martial Art films dominated the industry in 1920s
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation: 'Golden Age' of Chinese Cinema, focusing on humanist-realist tradition of 1930s -early 1940s
- 4<sup>th</sup> Generation: Soviet inspired propagandist films of Mao's early years

# Communist Filmmaking

- 1949: China Film Bureau instituted under the Ministry of Culture
- 1950s – 1960s: China developed state – sanctioned cinematic tradition of social realism
  - Valued form over content
  - Brought viewer's attention to the fact that they were watching a constructed fantasy
  - Portrayed nationalistic values
  - Featured peasant/ soldier protagonists
- Mao's Cultural Revolution:
  - Banned vast majority of films that came before (both Chinese and Foreign imports)
  - Few films made during this period
  - Filmmakers persecuted for their supposed Capitalist leanings by the Red Guard
    - Often tortured and killed with other artists and intellectuals



# Fifth Generation of Chinese Cinema

- The traumatic experiences of the Cultural Revolution, increasing Western Films and a constructive role played by the Beijing Film Academy contributed to a New Vibrancy
- Early films characterized by stark locations and methods of representations where minority groups are prominent
- A New Film Language: recalling traditional Chinese painting and a narrative structure that questions Chinese culture itself
  - Rich, Elaborate Mis-en-Scène
  - Meticulous Framing
    - Use of close-ups and off-screen space to create tension
  - Allegory of China's oppression
  - Focus on Ambiguity
    - Openness to Audience Interpretation
- Directors:
  - Chen Kaige
  - Tian Zhuangzhuang
  - Zhang Yimou



# Zhang Yimou

- Born April 2, 1950
- Father fought with the Nationalists in the Chinese Civil War
- Spent years in forced labor on a farm and in a factory during the Cultural Revolution
- Attended Beijing Academy two years after the end of the Cultural Revolution
- Began his film career as a cinematographer
- Known for his rich use of color, themes of sexual repression and political oppression as well as his collaborations with Gong Li
- Despite being banned in China, the film Ju Dou was the first Chinese film to be nominated for an Academy Award
- Red Sorghum (1987), Ju Dou (1990), Raise the Red Lantern (1991), Hero (2002), House of Flying Daggers (2004), Curse of the Golden Flower (2006), Flowers of War (2011), The Great Wall (2016)

# Zhang Yimou

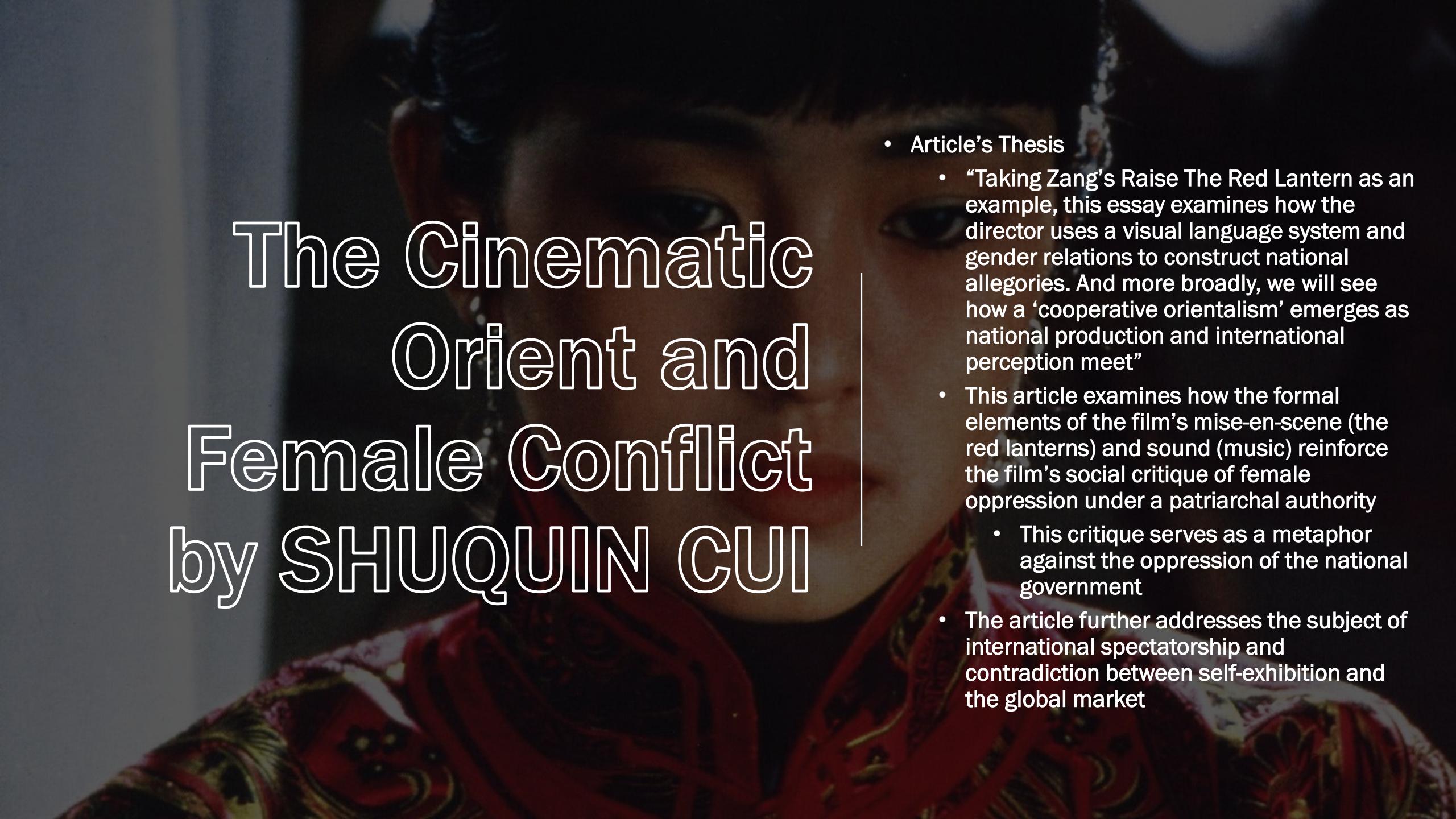
- Master of Color Video  
Essay





# Raise The Red Lantern: Film Statistics

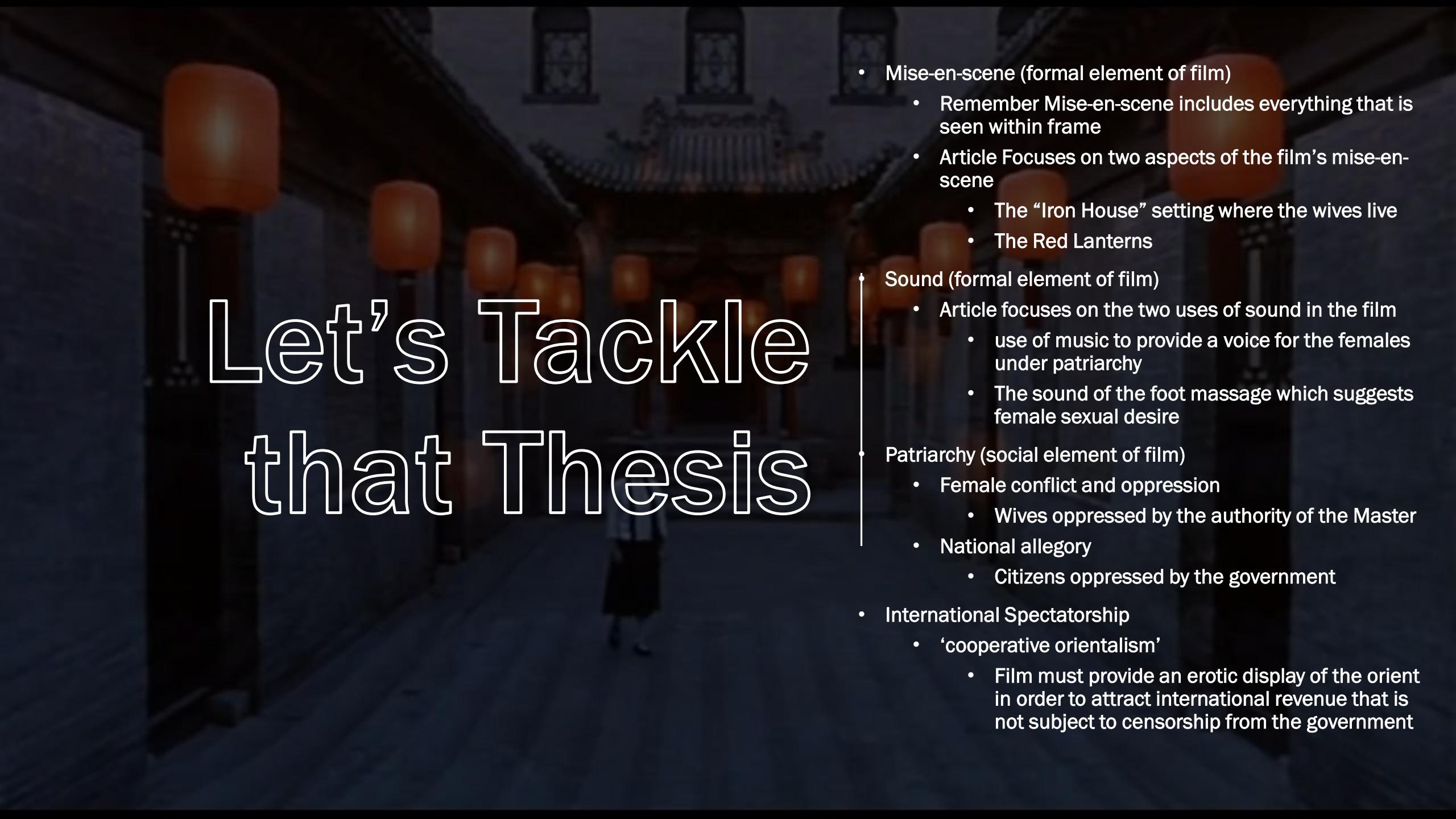
- Director = Zang Yimou
  - Seen as a director who introduces Chinese films to international viewers
- Star = Gong Li (Songlian)
- Gross = \$2,603,061 (USA)
- Film received a Silver Lion at Venice International Film Festival
- Film nominated for a Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Language in Film in 1992
- Film was banned at home
- Film presents a critique of Chinese patriarchal discourse, regarding family structure, concubine system, and gender relations



# The Cinematic Orient and Female Conflict

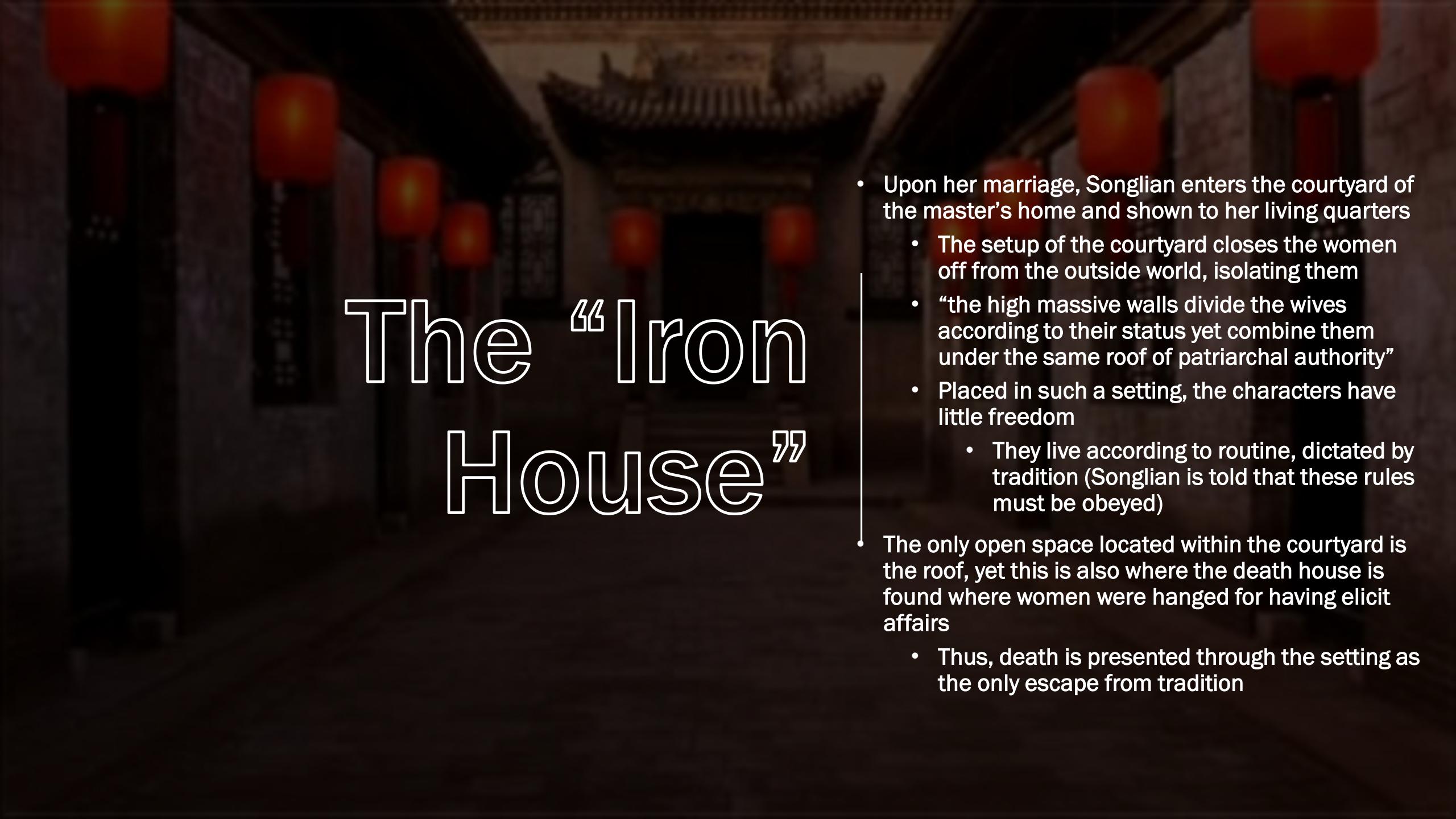
by SHUQUIN CUI

- Article's Thesis
  - “Taking Zang's *Raise The Red Lantern* as an example, this essay examines how the director uses a visual language system and gender relations to construct national allegories. And more broadly, we will see how a ‘cooperative orientalism’ emerges as national production and international perception meet”
  - This article examines how the formal elements of the film's mise-en-scene (the red lanterns) and sound (music) reinforce the film's social critique of female oppression under a patriarchal authority
    - This critique serves as a metaphor against the oppression of the national government
  - The article further addresses the subject of international spectatorship and contradiction between self-exhibition and the global market



# Let's Tackle that Thesis

- Mise-en-scene (formal element of film)
  - Remember Mise-en-scene includes everything that is seen within frame
  - Article Focuses on two aspects of the film's mise-en-scene
    - The “Iron House” setting where the wives live
    - The Red Lanterns
- Sound (formal element of film)
  - Article focuses on the two uses of sound in the film
    - use of music to provide a voice for the females under patriarchy
    - The sound of the foot massage which suggests female sexual desire
- Patriarchy (social element of film)
  - Female conflict and oppression
    - Wives oppressed by the authority of the Master
  - National allegory
    - Citizens oppressed by the government
- International Spectatorship
  - ‘cooperative orientalism’
    - Film must provide an erotic display of the orient in order to attract international revenue that is not subject to censorship from the government



# The “Iron House”

- Upon her marriage, Songlian enters the courtyard of the master's home and shown to her living quarters
  - The setup of the courtyard closes the women off from the outside world, isolating them
  - “the high massive walls divide the wives according to their status yet combine them under the same roof of patriarchal authority”
  - Placed in such a setting, the characters have little freedom
    - They live according to routine, dictated by tradition (Songlian is told that these rules must be obeyed)
- The only open space located within the courtyard is the roof, yet this is also where the death house is found where women were hanged for having illicit affairs
  - Thus, death is presented through the setting as the only escape from tradition

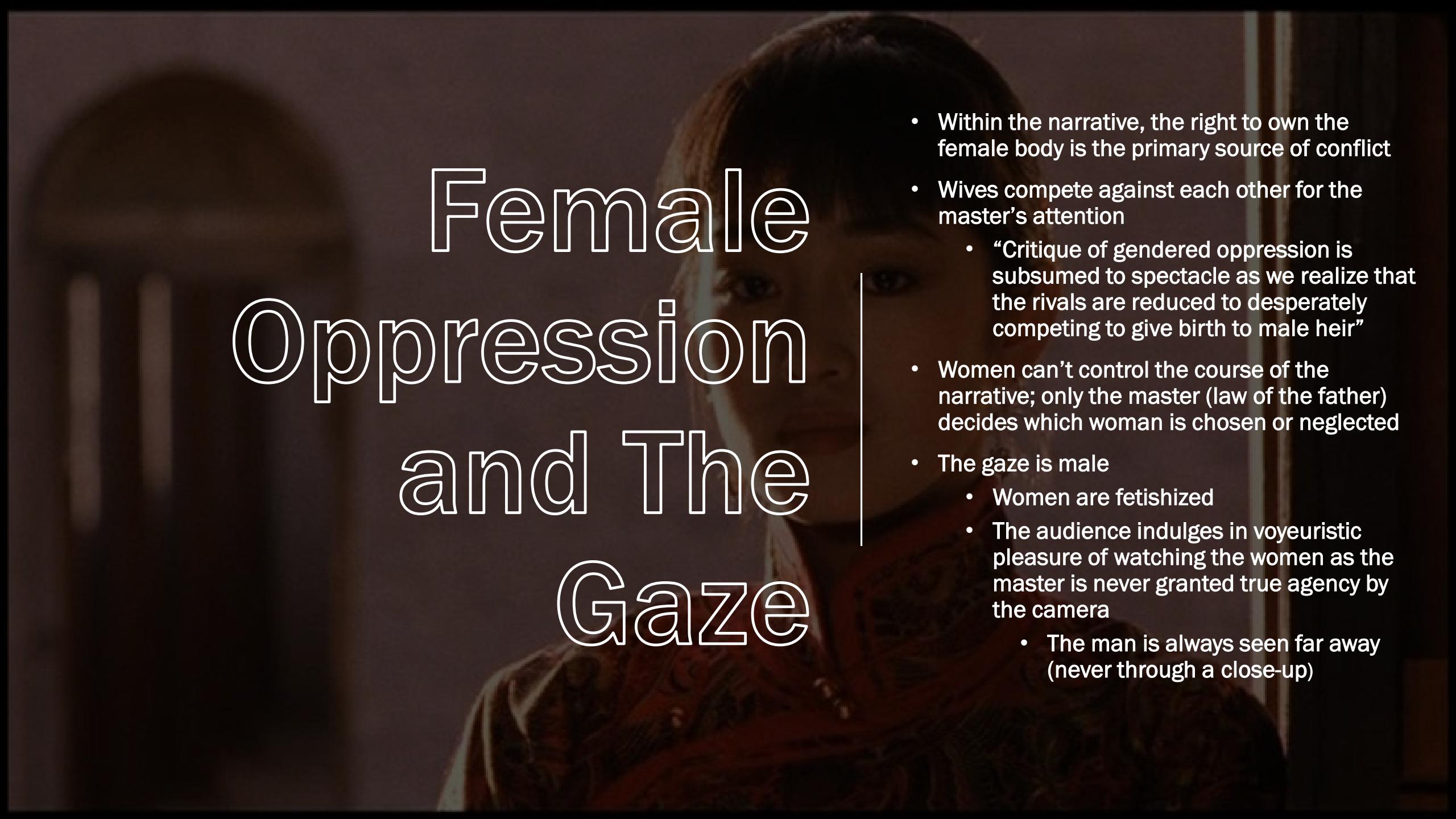
# The Iron-House and National Allegory

- Originates from a literary tradition which signifies the nation as a sealed space where citizens languish and suffocate
- Director transforms this metaphor into the visually closed space where the master lives in order to explore the oppressive nature of tradition
  - The iron house also serves as national allegory; china is seen as a patriarchal authority (like the master) that denies its people (signified by the wives) any possibility of freedom
  - “The Chinese have for a long time confined themselves within a, restricted, walled space...we have a historical legacy of extinguishing human desire” – Zang Yimou



# The Red Lantern

- The lantern is lit as the master arrives for the night, extinguished as he leaves, and permanently veiled should a wife violate the master's rules (we see this with Songlian after her faked pregnancy is discovered)
- As a visual and patriarchal symbol, the lantern indicates male possession of the female body
- The color red suggest sexual engagement
- The lanterns signify the rise and fall of the women in the sexual economy of the household
  - Since the lantern indicates the master's favor and accords them privileges such as picking the menu and getting a foot massage
  - Thus, the women turn on each other and compete for these privileges – they compete for the master's sexual attention



# Female Oppression and The Gaze

- Within the narrative, the right to own the female body is the primary source of conflict
- Wives compete against each other for the master's attention
  - “Critique of gendered oppression is subsumed to spectacle as we realize that the rivals are reduced to desperately competing to give birth to male heir”
- Women can't control the course of the narrative; only the master (law of the father) decides which woman is chosen or neglected
- The gaze is male
  - Women are fetishized
  - The audience indulges in voyeuristic pleasure of watching the women as the master is never granted true agency by the camera
  - The man is always seen far away (never through a close-up)

# Film Clip 1



# Female Oppression



- The film shows that a woman's desire to meet the masters demands requires the sacrifice of the female body
  - The destructive consequences of the female body – sickness, pregnancy, menstruation, sexual affairs are turned into elements of competition between the wives
- Women take the positions of both oppressor and oppressed which allows men to retreat from the scene and deflect accusations of patriarchal oppression.
- Women are staged for spectacle while the male manipulates the show from the background
  - The female orient is eroticized (particularly for Western viewers)
- Absence of the Master (male figure) doesn't diminish his authority – in fact his absence reinforces his authority and the patriarchal discourse of the nation
- The invisibility of the male figure leaves a space that invites the spectator to project its gaze on the female image
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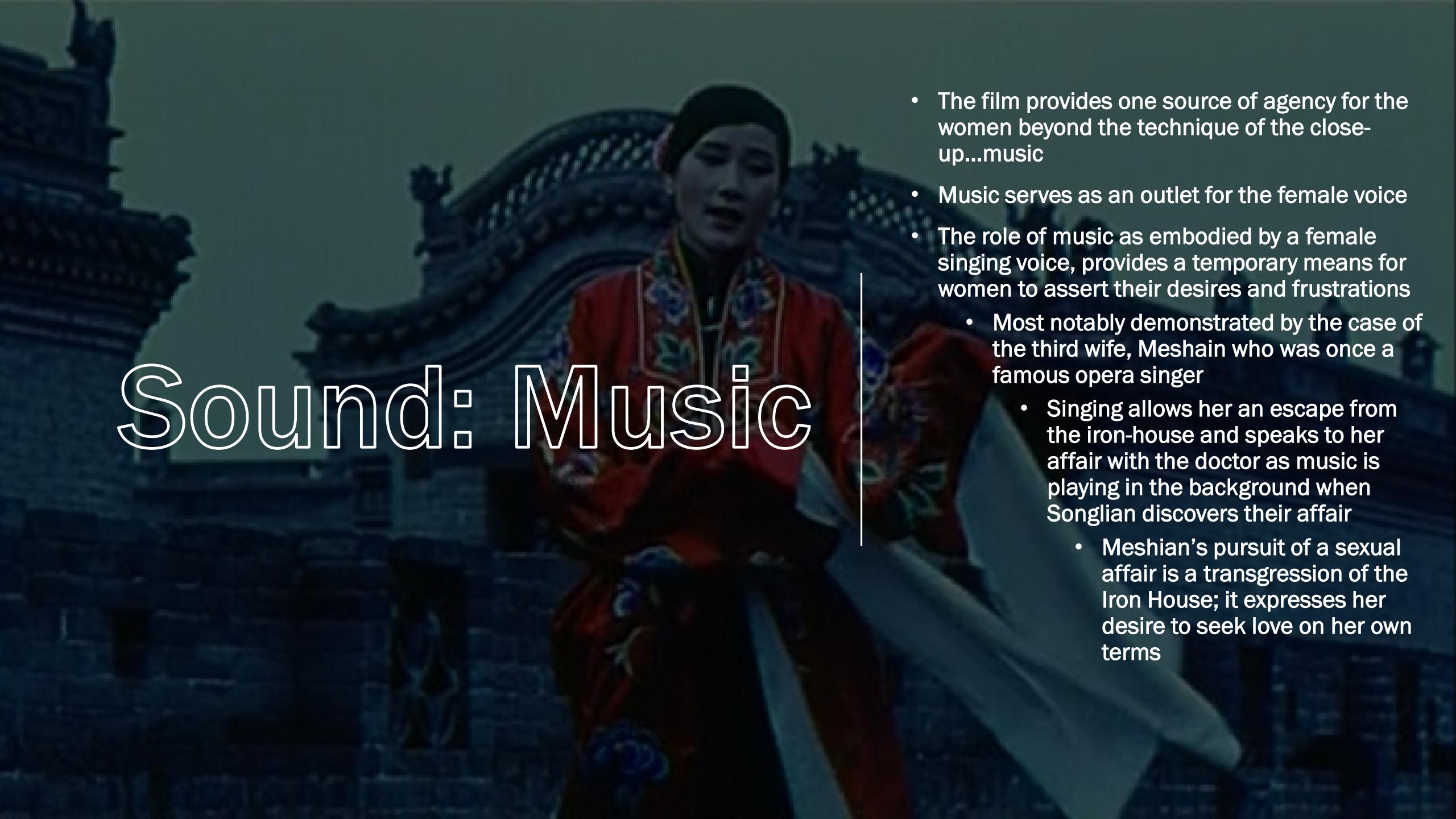


# Sound: The Foot Massage

- Foot massages are linked to female sexual desire
  - This desire is only actualized at the favor of the master; thus, men inhibit and control female desire
- To illustrate this: Example from Article
  - In the film, as the second wife is chosen to get the foot massage treatment, the Songlian and the maid both fantasize about receiving the massage
  - These two scene are connected by the sound of foot massage beaters first being heard at the 2<sup>nd</sup> house, then the film switches to Songlian who sits with her feet propped up and eyes closed in an almost euphoric way as the sound intensifies, and finally, the scene cuts to the maid imagining the same massage treatment being given to her while in her shabby room
  - The transition of sound from an onscreen image of the second wife's massage to the off-screen space creates and visual atmosphere that connects all three women

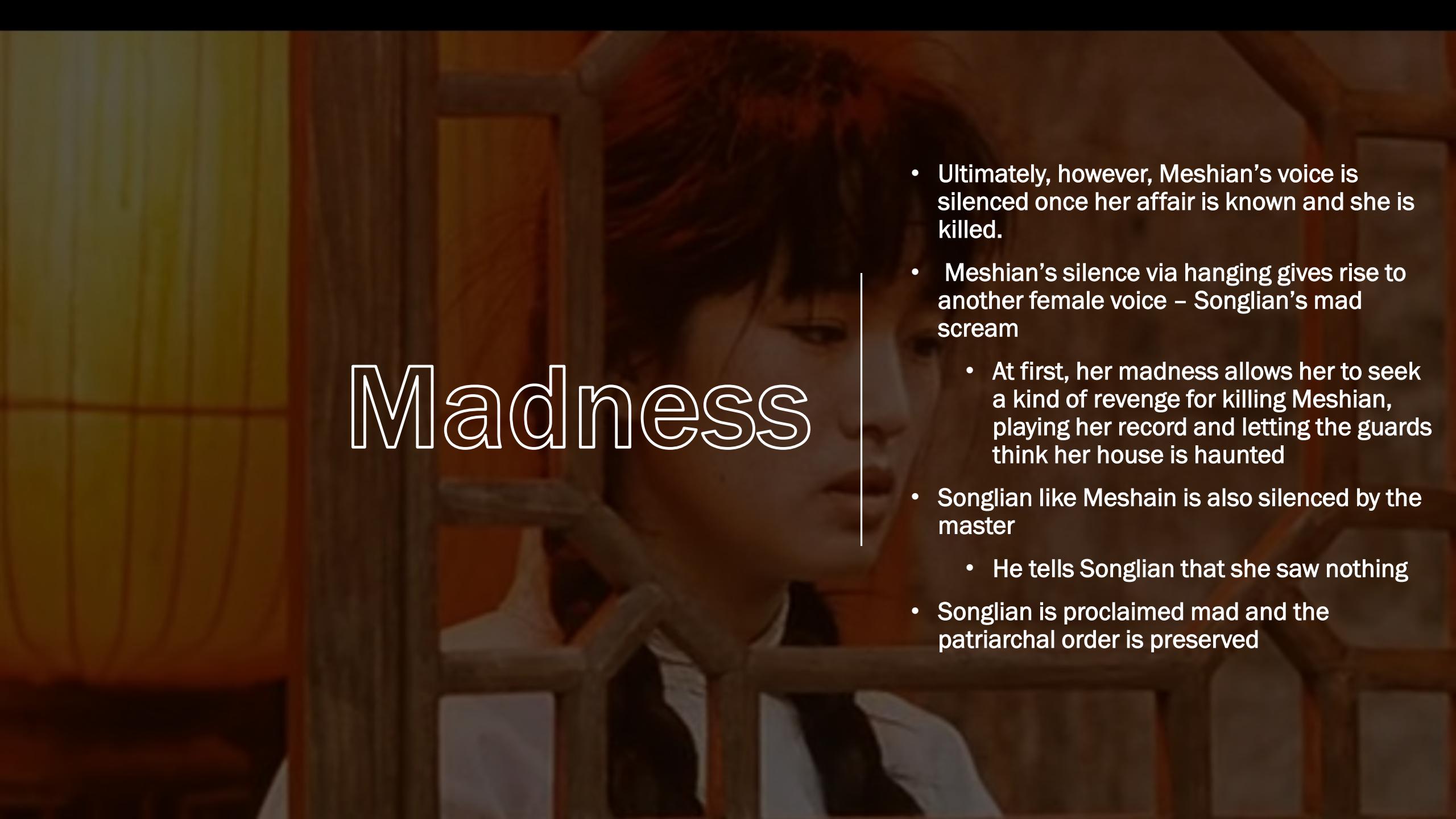
# Film Clip 2



A woman with dark hair tied back is singing into a microphone. She is wearing a traditional Chinese robe with a colorful, patterned collar. The background is dark and out of focus, showing what appears to be a traditional building with curved roofs.

# Sound: Music

- The film provides one source of agency for the women beyond the technique of the close-up...music
- Music serves as an outlet for the female voice
- The role of music as embodied by a female singing voice, provides a temporary means for women to assert their desires and frustrations
  - Most notably demonstrated by the case of the third wife, Meshain who was once a famous opera singer
  - Singing allows her an escape from the iron-house and speaks to her affair with the doctor as music is playing in the background when Songlian discovers their affair
  - Meshian's pursuit of a sexual affair is a transgression of the Iron House; it expresses her desire to seek love on her own terms

A woman with long dark hair is looking through a window, her face partially obscured by shadows. A man in a suit stands behind her, looking out as well. The scene is set in a traditional Chinese residence with wooden architecture.

# Madness

- Ultimately, however, Meshian's voice is silenced once her affair is known and she is killed.
- Meshian's silence via hanging gives rise to another female voice – Songlian's mad scream
  - At first, her madness allows her to seek a kind of revenge for killing Meshian, playing her record and letting the guards think her house is haunted
- Songlian like Meshain is also silenced by the master
  - He tells Songlian that she saw nothing
- Songlian is proclaimed mad and the patriarchal order is preserved

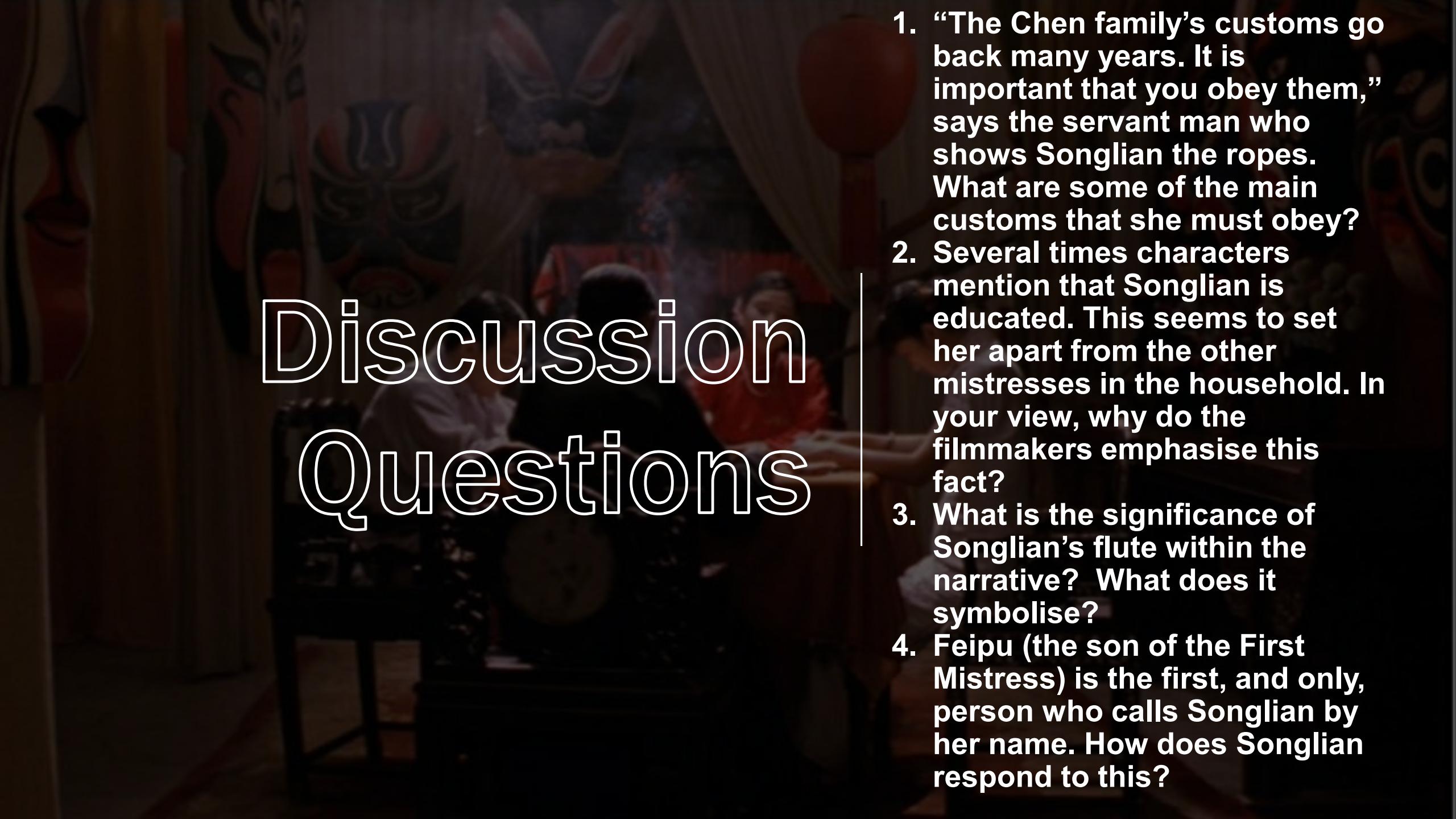
# Film Clip 3





# International Spectatorship

- Film is meant to appeal to an International audience
- Film fetishizes women and Oriental culture
  - Chinese viewers disagree with the portrayal of Oriental culture while Western viewers are fascinated by the eroticism of the orient in the film
- Such representations, drawn from an indefinite past and often placed in primitive setting, meet the expectations of the spectator's imagined vision of China: oppressive yet visually stunning
- Cooperative Orientalism
  - Engagement between cultural artifact and market system
  - In order to combat the censorship of the Chinese government, filmmakers have to attract a foreign audience
    - This audience is attracted through a process of self-exhibition where the Orient eroticizes themselves



# Discussion Questions

1. “The Chen family’s customs go back many years. It is important that you obey them,” says the servant man who shows Songlian the ropes. What are some of the main customs that she must obey?
2. Several times characters mention that Songlian is educated. This seems to set her apart from the other mistresses in the household. In your view, why do the filmmakers emphasise this fact?
3. What is the significance of Songlian’s flute within the narrative? What does it symbolise?
4. Feipu (the son of the First Mistress) is the first, and only, person who calls Songlian by her name. How does Songlian respond to this?



# Discussion Questions Continued

5. How is the film narrated? Is it told through omniscient or restricted narration? What difference does it make that the story is narrated this way (for the viewer)?
6. The film is divided into chapters: Summer, Autumn, Winter, The Next Summer.
7. Why do you suppose the filmmakers chose these chapter titles to organise the film?
8. In your view, what is the purpose of the foot massages and the rattles used to amplify the sound whenever they take place?
9. Any thoughts about the meaning of the film's title?