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# Ji Sor (1997): Self-Realization of Women in Cinema and in History

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Claremont McKenna College

***Ji Sor* (1997): Self-Realization of Women in Cinema and in History**

submitted to  
Professor James Morrison

by  
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for  
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### Notes on Transliteration

Officially translated as *Intimates*, the name of the movie *Ji Sor* is pronounced as “Zi Shu” in Mandarin and “Ji Sor” in Cantonese. Throughout this thesis, I choose to keep its name as “Ji Sor,” which is how it is pronounced at where it was produced. For the purpose of distinguishing between the historical phenomena and the film itself, “Zishu” is used to refer to the historical phenomenon while “Ji Sor” only refers to the film. The women who chose the path of Zishu are called Zishunu, where “nu” means “women.” In past literature, they had also been referred to by many names, including “self-combed women,” “comb sister,” and “sworn spinster.”

In general, I use Hanyu Pinyin system when transcribing Chinese terms. If Cantonese Romanization is used when there are better-known translations for the mentioned terms, their Hanyu Pinyin are stated in parenthesis. A glossary that includes all mentioned terms (books, cities, people names, etc.) is attached at the end.

## Introduction

After getting her graduate degree in History from a very prestigious Ivy League University, a friend of mine was asked to give up her chance of starting her career as an Assistant Professor at this school and go back to the small city where we were born. The very father of this girl later gave a speech about marriage during a group dinner he had with a couple of other parents, including mine. The gentleman told the whole table about the two beautiful and well-educated daughters of his wealthy business partner, and how the two girls were too picky in searching for their other half. Now that they were single women past 30, their worth would never be the same. This father then proudly claimed how wise it was for him to ask his daughter to come back home right away and start going on dates he set up for her. It is heartbreaking to see that people still see girls, even their own daughters, as commodities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With my open-minded parents, I am not under as much pressure. Yet the first question anyone asked me when I was home last summer was, “Do you have a boyfriend yet?” People were asking the same question again and again; some out of concern, others simply as an ice-breaking topic.

Marriage is the biggest occasion a Chinese person could have in his or her life: it's much bigger than getting into a good school, bigger than childbirth, and generally bigger than funerals as well. While my grandparents moved into the city, all of their siblings stayed in the small town with my great grandparents. I only see all my relatives once a year during the Spring Festival. By “relatives,” I mean the six siblings of my grandfather, eight siblings of my grandmother, plus their partners and descendants. Last winter, I attended the wedding of the son of one of my mother's aunts, whom I have

never said a word to in my life. The wedding banquet, with 100 tables in total, took up the whole floor. Each table is a unit. The bride and groom had to propose a toast at each table, drink and smile their way through all tables.

Many traditional values and customs are gems that should be preserved, but for some others, maybe not so much. Women were never liberated from the shackles of marriage. A man who excels in business and neglects his family can still be seen as successful; a woman who does so is a failed wife and irresponsible mother. To so many men, gender equality means a dutiful wife should still take care of everything at home and work as much as her husband as well. One of my old friends is currently in a very unhappy relationship. When I asked why she chose to stay, she answered: “I have to marry someone someday anyway.” As unreasonable as it is to expect every human being to find their significant others within the five-year range from the age 25 to 30, for both men and women in today’s China, few had the courage to delay, not to mention to forgo marriage. I am not arguing that staying single is the best way for women to claim independence, but I believe we should all have the liberty to choose our own paths.

100 years ago, however, there was a group of women called Zishunu who stood up against the whole society and swore off marriage for life. Zishu offered an escape for many women in the Pearl River Delta area. There are many reasons for a woman to choose the path of Zishu: to step away from the heavy duties as a wife and mother, to avoid unamicable or unwilling marriages, to step away from men, etc. Out of the protection of the traditional values of marriage and societal stability, the dominant narrative of the Qing Dynasty and the early period of the Republic of China saw Zishu as

an abominable act that is in conflict with traditions, society, and even the law of nature. With the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the braveness and defiance of Zishu matched the Marxist Feminism and the revolutionary spirit glorified by the new society. As female industrial workers, Zishunu served as a perfect representative of the new ideal women. As time passed by, people started to view Zishunu as a mysterious group distant from the modern world, an alienated group who were forced to make passive and irrational decisions.

As forerunners in female independence and liberation, Zishunu never had the chance to be the spokesman of themselves or the recognition they deserved. For a contemporary audience, the 1997 movie *Ji Sor* directed by Jacob Cheung is the most influential media representation and most accessible media reference of Zishu. The portrayal of Zishu and Zishunu in *Ji Sor* greatly contributes to the perception of this little-known historical phenomenon in today's world. On top of its significance in representing Zishu, *Ji Sor*, which is seen as a precedent of lesbian-themed movies in Chinese cinema, becomes an entity that is more sensitive and complex than the subject of Zishu. Released a few months after the Handover of Hong Kong in 1997, this critically acclaimed movie made by a Hong Kong New Wave filmmaker embodies the three biggest fears of an extremely conservative society: absence of marriage, challenges to male hegemony, and homosexuality. Strongly associated with human liberation and social values, both marriage and homosexuality are themes that are treated with great caution, especially in Asian cinema. No one is to say that either one can be used as an accurate indicator of



society's development, but the attitudes towards related artwork are complicated and worth investigating.

Zishu is a unique custom that was formed by specific social environment and geographical location, but *Ji Sor* captures the essence of women's self-empowerment and performs its own historical significance. Although seen as representatives of strong and independent women, Zishunu had to make a lot of compromises to the patriarchal culture to be allowed not to marry. A hundred years later, we are still asking what gender equality really means, what is women's power, what is independence, what is feminism? "No marriage" is clearly not the answer we are looking for in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this thesis, I don't plan to fully solve these questions. Rather, I hope to find some inspirations by exploring the looking glass of our society and our values -- the cinematic world. Films reflect the society we are in, and what we want our society to be as well. As a major tool of cultural education and diffusion, motion pictures and their depictions of certain subjects play a crucial role in shaping the contemporary understanding of such subjects. Out of curiosity and admiration, I feel obliged to study more on the subject of Zishu and explore what else could be done in today's world. By taking a close look at the historical context, living situations, and psychology of Zishunu, I wish to first establish a comprehensive recognition of this custom that is often taken as a synonym of women independence in the Chinese history. With a more thorough understanding of Zishu, I intend to discuss how *Ji Sor* portrays Zishunu and the significance of such depiction in the context of Hong Kong cinema of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through the analyses of Zishu and *Ji Sor* both individually and together, I am set out to find useful guidance on what

gender equalities and sexual identities mean in the cinematic world, and hopefully in the real world too.

## Zishu and Zishunu

### The Patriarchal Family Structure and Marriage Customs

About 2300 years ago, the book *I-Li* that recorded the etiquette and ceremonial of Zhou Dynasty stated that: “there are three persons to whom she owes allegiance, and in whose case she has no power of choice. Before marriage she obeys her father, after marriage her husband, and when he is dead, her son.”<sup>1</sup>

300 years later, in the Han Dynasty, a famous female intellectual Ban Zhao explained the four virtues that women should have in her book *Lessons for Women*:<sup>2</sup>

To guard carefully her chastity, to control circumspectly her behavior, in every motion to exhibit modesty, and to model each act on the best usage: this may be called womanly virtue.

To choose her words with care, to avoid vulgar language, to speak at appropriate times, and not to be offensive to others may be called womanly speech.

To wash and scrub dirt and grime, to keep clothes and ornaments fresh and clean, to wash the head and bathe the body regularly, and to keep the person free from disgraceful filth may be called womanly appearance.

With wholehearted devotion to sew and weave, not to love gossip and silly laughter, in cleanliness and order [to prepare] the wine and food or serving guests may be called womanly work.

By the Tang Dynasty (618 - 907), the most common reasons that husbands divorced and abandoned their wives were officially included in the national laws.<sup>3</sup> With

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1. John Steele, *The I-Li or book of etiquette and ceremonial = I-li*, vol. 2 (London: Probsthain, 1917), 20.

2. Nancy Lee Swann, *Pan Chao: foremost woman scholar of China* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 2001), 82-90.

3. Wallace Johnson, *The T'ang code* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

some exclusions applied, the laws stipulated seven reasons that men could unilaterally and justifiably terminate their marriages if the wife: fails to bear a son, commits adultery, lacks filial piety towards parents-in-law, is too chatty or gossipy, commits theft, extreme jealousy, has a vile disease.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, the only way women could pledge for a divorce is called Yijue (义绝), a divorce system that applies when either party commits serious crimes against the relatives of their partner, such as murder and rape.

Similar to most of the other traditional cultures around the world, ancient China was a male-dominant patrilineal society. Sancong (三从, three obedience), Side (四德, four virtues), and Qichu (七出, seven outs, or seven grounds for divorcing wife) were the fundamental codes of women's morality, and also the six words that bound Chinese women longer and more tightly than the foot-binding cloths. In the hierarchy of traditional Chinese cultural family life, the universal "law" that all should follow regardless of gender and age is Xiao (孝). This word refers to filial piety owed to parents and parents-in-law. Based on the ancient teachings of the Confucius: When parents call, don't be slow to answer; when parents give an order, act, don't be lazy; when parents teach, one must listen respectfully; when parents reprimand, one must accept.

The notion of absolute obedience to parents means parents have the ultimate control over every aspect of their children's life, especially marriage. Although polygyny was widely accepted, male descendants also had little say in whom their principal wives would be. Marriage is not between individuals but between families. The willingness of

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4. Dai De and Lu Bian, *Da dai li ji* (Bei jing: Zhong hua shu ju, 1985).

brides and grooms did not matter at all in the process of marriage arrangement.

Matchmakers are the only bridge between unmarried young adults. Young girls and their future husbands are matched with respect to family's social class and economic status.

The wedding night is often the first time that the brides and grooms see each other. Social values and business benefits of a marital union largely determine a woman's position at Fujia (夫家, the husband's house or family) and whom the girls marry would determine their status back at Niangjia (娘家, the original families of the wives) as well.

Proper marriages, however, are not available to the daughters of the very poor. The position of the wife was still relatively supreme in a big household, while concubines and maidens have no power at all. The children of concubines are also treated drastically different and are in no position to compete with those of principal wives. Women from families at the bottom of social ladder cannot be taken as the wife into families with much higher social statuses. They were often sold as slaves at young ages and performed domestic work for their owners. These households often arrange the marriages of these women and slavery would end as thus. Girls from poor families may also be bought, taken or adopted into a family to serve other purposes such concubines, Tongyangxi (童养媳, child bride), Chongxi (冲喜, to arrange a wedding for the dangerously sick with the aim of driving away the devil and the disease), Zhaodi (招弟/招娣, adopt a girl hoping such action could "hail a brother" to the family).

#### Social Value of Women Under Rapid Social and Economic Change

Around the mid-19th century, the phenomenon of Zishu started to flourish in the Pearl River Delta area. The custom of Zishu has received much attention from scholars

regarding its origins. There's no clear documentation on when Zishu first emerged. Most literature developed a theory based on the sprouts of capitalism, the bloom of silk industry in Shunde, and the economic independence of female workers in the silk industry. Marjorie Topley suggests that Zishu started to grow around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century following the booming of the silk industry in Pearl River Delta area.<sup>5</sup> The huge demand for female workers allowed them to be economically independent and facilitated the awakening of the female self-awareness. This theory is seconded by many scholars, including Janice Stockard and Alvin So, but also questioned by some others. Helen F. Siu believes economic reason alone cannot explain why Zishu was also quite popular among wealthy families.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Siu proposes the customs of Zishu are related to ethnic minority groups existed in the history of South China, and Zishu may already exist in early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the Pearl River Delta area, an ancient custom of many ethnic minorities called Buluo Fujia (不落夫家) had existed long before the emergence of Zishu.<sup>7</sup> Women would live with their original families after marriage and only move to Fujia if they get pregnant.

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5. Margery Wolf, Roxane Witke, and Emily Martin, *Women in Chinese society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975).

6. Helen Siu, "Funu hezai? 《妇女何在》 (Where Were the Women? Rethinking Marriage Resistance and Regional Culture History)," *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Jikan 中国社会科学季刊 (Chinese Social Science Quarterly)*, Spring 1996.

7. Sen Wang et al., *Yue xi cong zai jiao zhu* (Nanning Shi: Guangxi min zu chu ban she, 2007).

By the time of Qing Dynasty, the mulberry dike-fish pond model around Shunde area had developed into a significant industry with scale and greatly stimulated the local sericulture industry. For local women, the complex labor system that depended on farming and family transformed to simple employment relationships depend on individual productivity. As the avenue to material betterment opened up, young women were able to claim economical independence, which provided the basic conditions for them to break away from marriage. Another important reason behind the bloom of Zishu is the social transformations in Pearl River Delta area since mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is commonly agreed that mid-to-late Qing Dynasty to early days of the Republic of China is the heyday of Zishu. This is also a time of the greatest social instability in the modern Chinese history. Countless efforts were made to fight against the foreign forces and revolutionize the feudal system. In the one hundred years from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, China went through the campaign to suppress opium, the Opium Wars, Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, the Hundred Days' Reform, May Fourth Movement, etc. At the time, the concept of women's emancipation was high on the nationalist and modernizing agenda of progressive intellectuals, missionaries, and political activists. The relatively open societal and political environment laid the foundation for Zishu. The women emancipation movement had a significant effect in encouraging the custom of Zishu, or we may also say Zishu is also a special component of this movement.

Overall, Zishu is generally viewed as a combined product of historical, social, economic forces: marriage customs like Buluo Fujia, the mulberry dike-fish pond complex and sericulture industries specifically belonged to the Pearl River Delta area,

and the drastic social changes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under Western influences. There are many reasons why an individual woman would choose Zishu. The central power of such pursuit, says by Hong Kong scholar Hanming Ye, comes from the personal value (freedom and chastity) and group culture.<sup>8</sup> Originated from the interactive relationship between the patriarchal culture of South China and the subculture of Zishu community, Zishu is a decision that is made freely, proactively, and consciously by women themselves.



(<http://www.weather-forecast.com/locations/Shunde>)

From the late days of the Republic of China to the 1950s, the customs of Zishu in Pearl River Delta area gradually declined. Starting from the Great Depression (1929), the

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8. Hanming Ye, "Huanan Jiazu Wenhua Yu Zishu Fengxi," comp. Xiaojiang Li, *Zhuliu Yu Bianyuan*, 1999.



sales and prices of silk products dropped markedly. China's raw silk exportation was also greatly hurt by the dumping of viscose and rayon from Japan. Many silk factories closed down, and the whole sericulture industry collapsed. The downturn of the local and global economy resulted in a group immigration of women and especially Zishunu living in South China. South Asia, mainly Singapore, is the destination of these immigrations. These Zishunu worked as domestic helpers were given the name of Majie (妈姐, mother sister) in Singapore. A notable example was Ouyang Huanyan, a Majie who was employed by the family of Kuan Yew Lee, the former prime minister of Singapore.

#### Customs and Rituals of Zishu

In folk customs, unmarried teenage girls have long plaits, and wear their hair up as buns once they grow up and get married. Hairstyle acts as the indicator of the marital status of women. Young women needed to go through a complicated self-combing ceremony to declare their status of Zishu. The standard steps include the preparation of new items (clothes, hair brush, hairpin, etc.), a shower before the ceremony, pray in front of the goodness Guan Yin, having an older Zishunu to comb the hair up, and have a banquet for family friends at a scale comparable to weddings.<sup>9</sup> At the peak time of Zishu, the Zishunu community was extensive and especially prominent in Shunde. For a typical sericulture factory with a thousand female workers, roughly eighty percent of them were Zishunu.<sup>10</sup> Zishunu were economically independent and developed a very strong group

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9. Fengyi Wu, "'Zishunu' Yu 'Buluo Fujia': Yi Guangdong Shunde Wei Li." comp. Jianzhao Ma, *Huanan Hunyin Zhidu Yu Funu Diwei*.

10. Dongmao Sun, *Shunde Zishunv Fengsu Ji Tan*.

consciousness. Such consciousness was even furthered as Zishunu lived together, and strict taboos were formed.

In traditional marriage system, once a woman is married, she has to build new social relationships at Fujia and cut off any relations she has with her Niangjia's properties. In Pearl River Delta area, people believed that women who do not marry would bring bad luck to their families. Before they die, they have to be moved out of their own houses and die somewhere mountains or rivers. Their memorial tablets also cannot be in their parents' houses. The traditional customs left no place for single women to go after death. Since the day of their ceremonies, Zishunu made a pact with all the other sisters without saying. It is important to note that Zishunu are not isolated individuals; they are an organized group with common rules and restrictions. For a Zishunu, the social connections one may gain from marriage, family, and children are solely replaced by the bonding between other Zishunu. Sisters also take over the burial responsibility. Many Zishunu lived together as a group and assisted each other. Such group housing is called Gu Po Wu (姑婆屋, the house of the spinsters). Zishunu financed these houses together for group living, and built in facilities that satisfy needs of residency, worship of gods, and mourning for the dead.

Besides Zishu, Buluo Fujia and ghost marriages are two other ways women could choose to settle their afterlife affairs. The custom of Buluo Fujia in Shunde at the time was different from what it was for ancient ethnic minorities. A woman could get married and not live with her husband for the entire lifetime. On the day of the wedding, the bride's girl friends would make a special suit like a cotton bag that was sewed, marked,

and wrapped around her body under the wedding dress. The purpose is to make sure the chastity of the bride. If the bride returned home the next day with stitches that are any different from the original, she would be condemned, or sometimes actually be beaten by all her friends as she had lost her chastity. Some brides even bring suicide tools such as scissors and ropes to prevent the grooms from touching them. As for ghost marriage, it generally involves some forms of marriages between two people while one or both of them are dead. For Zishunu, some may choose to “marry” a man who died young and did not have a wife, so they have a place in the family memorial hall after death. The three different forms of nonsexual marriages all adopted symbols of marriage, signifying a married status, to be more acceptable to the dominant culture.

Zishunu’s resistance against marriage can also be seen in the gods they worship. Among these gods, Guan Yin is the most prominent religious and psychological pivot of Zishunu group. The underlying values of the worship of Guan Yin symbolized are her pureness, chastity, independence, mercifulness, and determination. In Zishunu’s beliefs, Guan Yin is the third princess of a king. To fight against the unwilling marriage her father arranges for her, she chooses to become a nun and starts her practices.<sup>11</sup> Guan Yin, Tin Hau (Tian Hou), and Qi Jie are all exemplar anti-marriage females, or all became anti-marriage role models in the stories told in the Zishunu community. In these stories, the determination against marriage and sisterhood between goddesses are strongly emphasized.

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11. Bing Xiao, “Jiedu Guangdong Shunde Zishunu De Zongjiao Xinyang,” *Journal of Shunde Polytechnic* 2, no. 1 (June 2004):.

Once a woman started her life as a Zishunu, she was not allowed ever to get involved with men afterward. Zishunu who break their pact and have sexual relationships with men were to be punished by death through Jin Zhulong (浸猪笼), according to the regulations of local clan.<sup>12</sup> Jin Zhulong, as a punishment for adultery in ancient China, locks the criminals into a cage made for pigs and drowns them. The families of these girls can protect their daughters by paying a certain amount of fine. Otherwise, the family members cannot be buried at the same place with their ancestors after death. A Zishunu who violates her oath is condemned by the local community and absolutely unacceptable to the Zishunu community as well. On the other side, homosexual relationships were quite common among Zishunu. For Zishunu who live together in Gu Po Wu or females workers in silk factories, it is nearly impossible for them to meet or socialize with men. Committing to such lesbian relationships is called Qi Xiangzhi (契相知): Qi means “pact” and Xiangzhi means “get to know each other very well.”

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12. Yifei Shao, “Shixi Zishunu Xisu De Qiyuan, Goucheng, Jiben Tezheng,” *Wenhua Yichan*, 2nd ser. (2012):.

### *Ji Sor (1997)*

As its name suggests, *Ji Sor* is a movie about and dedicated to Zishunu. The movie is narrated through cutting between with two parallel storylines: what happens in the underdeveloped Shunde in the 1940s, and what is happening now in the developed Hong Kong in the 1990s. Jia Hui (家慧, starred Theresa Lee) is a modern girl, smart, successful, and faithful. Her boyfriend, however, is cowardly and indecisive. As her boyfriend falls in love with another woman but still lingers around, Jia Hui gets more and more lost in this complicated relationship. Meanwhile, Jia Hui promises her father to accompany their long-time housemaid Huan Gu (欢姑, starred Gwa Aleh) to go back to her hometown, and thus starts their journey of self-discovery. Huan Gu, whose name is Yi Huan (意欢, starred Charlie Young), narrates the story from the first person perspective. Towards the end, everyone is startled to find out that Huan Gu is actually the other person in the story, Yu Huan (玉环, starred Carina Lau). After they are separated from each other, Yu Huan takes the name of Yi Huan. The similarity of the two protagonists' names entails the mistaken identity and their entangled fate.

Whether it's Yi Huan, a Zishunu from the bottom of society, or Jia Hui, a highly educated architect, they are both very vulnerable in the battle of love. Abandoned by her lover, Yi Huan almost dies from self-induced abortion. Yu Huan spends her entire saving to save Yi Huan. This scene, as the turning point of the storyline, directly transforms the relationship between Yi Huan and Yu Huan. Cutting back to Hong Kong in 50 years, Jia Hui attempts suicide because of her boyfriend's betrayal. Huan Gu thumps the door open, saved another young woman from the verge of death. "You want to die?" says Huan Gu,

“For someone who does not love you?” As the main character in both storylines, Yu Huan helped the other person find their self again. When we want to interrogate the society for gender inequality and our misery, we also need to carefully inspect ourselves: how are we dealing with the situations? Where do we place ourselves?

*Ji Sor* is shot in a simple and direct way, rendering a very accurate portrait of the customs of Zishu and Zishunu. From scenery to costumes, they all bring the audience back to Shunde in the 40s. The first scene about Zishu is its ceremony: an older Zishunu combs and braid the hair of the young girl while chanting good wishes for the future. The serenity and elegance of the cinematography added a mysterious and sensual beauty to Zishu. Following the ceremony is a chaotic scene where the family Yi Huan’s father wants to sell her to send people to take Yi Huan. All the other sisters bravely stand up for Yi Huan even though she just becomes a Zishunu. Sisterhood is the most important thing in the life of Zishunu.

When Yu Huan first appears in the movie, she wears a two-piece yellow dress, a more modern and Western design, while the other wives appear in Qi Pao, a more common and traditional choice for Chinese women in the 30s. The clothes worn by Huan Gu, white top and black trousers, is a typical outfit worn by Majie. The past and the reality are distinguished through both pacing and color: the reality has a medium pacing with a gray and blue color tone; the past, relatively slower, is romanticized with a coral render. The past, though full of misery and struggle, is warm and romantic in the memory.

The representation of marriage in *Ji Sor* is heartless and brutal, but unfortunately true. Yu Huan, as the eighth wife, has to deal with the previous wives and the competition from a potential new concubine. At the same time, the first wife, although generally at a relatively higher status, can try her best to put Yu Huan in a difficult situation but cannot stop her husband from marrying more concubines. After women get married, to secure their positions as wives, they have to be very cautious to not violate any rule of Qi Chu. If a wife bears no sons, “it was her duty not only to acquiesce in but to further the choice of concubines.”<sup>13</sup> A wife who refuses to do so could be justifiably abandoned. *Ji Sor* also includes a very detailed portrayal of Mai Menkou (买门口), one way some Zishunu deal with afterlife affairs. Zishunu could pay a certain amount of money to “marry” into a family so they would not be left alone after death. Such families, like Wang Cheng’s family in *Ji Sor*, are often very poor and need the money. Similar to Buluo Fujia and ghost marriage, Mai Menkou also has an actual ceremony but only as a formality. The bride only stays at Fujia for one night. Before the “marriage,” the sisters at Gu Po Wu sew the clothes of the bride tightly. She also brings a pair of scissors for self-protection. The bride eats nothing but ginkgo seeds before she leaves for her wedding night, as it is said that ginkgo seeds can prohibit urination. This scene accurately presents the ultimate contradiction of Zishunu’s lives. Although most of these Zishunu strongly detest all men during life, they would still be buried with men after death. While trying to adhere to their principles, Zishunu are not able to ignore the feudal marriage system.

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13. Florence Wheelock Ayscough, *Chinese women, yesterday & to-day. Illus. from the Chinese* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937), 31.

Under the hegemonic social values, the emancipation of women was far from complete even though the Pearl River Delta area is relatively much more open.

Yu Huan is a revolutionary character that leads the development of both storylines. No matter how time changes, she makes her own decisions and does what she wants to do, which to certain extent breaks the shackles of feudal ethics. Although played by different actresses, the terrific performances of Carina Lau and Gua Aleh illustrate such quality consistently throughout the movie. Facing the scheming of the other concubines, Yu Huan never cares about social class or how other people see her. No one can tell her how to spend her money or who to befriend. When Yu Huan's husband leaves her at another man's house and uses her as a "gift" to help his business. Such abominable and shameless of her husband does not diminish Yu Huan's pride at all. Rather, she gets to see the true colors of these people who despise her even clearer. When she comes back and stands in front of the whole family, she is more confident than ever. Yu Huan is rational and realistic, but extremely determined when it comes to love. Facing the betrayal of her husband, Yu Huan resolutely leaves this wealthy family. On the ship to the United States, she chooses to jump off the boat and because being with Yi Huan is more important than being alive. In one dialogue between Yi Huan and Yu Huan, Yi Huan explains why Zishunu have to Mai Menkou so they wouldn't become wandering ghosts after death. Yu Huan says: "I don't care. I will deal things afterlife after I die." Believing the life in front of her is more important relative to superstition, the ideology of Yu Huan is incredibly ahead of her time.



Yi Huan is a typical Chinese woman from the 1940s: she is gentle, gracious, and hard-working, hoping for a better life but fate always disappoints her. Yi Huan does not choose Zishu out of hatred of men but to stop her father from selling her to pay his debt. Yi Huan and Wang Cheng are in love for a long time, but Wang Cheng is too poor to take her as his wife. Most reviews see Yi Huan as a passive character in *Ji Sor* for she is more influenced by the traditional values and denies her love for Yu Huan at first. Although she seems relatively passive at first look, one comes to see Yi Huan as equally or even more determined and brave as Yu Huan. From the very beginning, Yi Huan stands up against her parents and defies the rules of Xiao (filial duty) to escape a destiny that many young girls would simply accept. After she becomes a Zishunu, she is willing to take the risk of death to be with the man she loves. She stands up against the wives of her boss to protect her life savor Yu Huan. The betrayal of Wang Cheng after she gets pregnant hits Yi Huan hard. Picturing a brand new start with Wang Cheng, she only comes to realize that her lover is too much of a coward to give up his life for her. Even then, she has the courage to deal with abortion by herself.

Yi Huan's development throughout the movie is exactly the essence of the main theme of *Ji Sor* -- women's self-realization and self-empowerment. In the first half of the film, Yi Huan's emotions towards Yu Huan are mostly loyalty and gratitude. When Yu Huan confesses her feelings to Yi Huan, Yi Huan pushes her away and says: "We are both women. We can't." Following is one of the most beautifully handled scenes in *Ji Sor*. Yu Huan steps outside, and what separates them is the paper window between them. It takes courage to break the paper, the feudal ethics, but not everyone is brave enough.

The turning point of the story is when Yu Huan spends her entire saving to save Yi Huan. Sitting on a bench in the hospital, Yi Huan binds up the wound on Yu Huan's hand. Without a word, they sit next to each other quietly under the sunlight. It does not matter how chaotic the society is. With each other, they now have the absolute peace inside. In the process, Yi Huan gets to see herself clearer and become more and more brave. Not everyone is born with the courage to stand up against everything, and even we do, we may not know what our hearts really want. For the broader population, the journey of self-discovery is more significant.

“Parallel” is a key word for *Ji Sor*: the two parallel storylines in *Ji Sor*, the search of self-identity under rapid social changes in 1940s South China and 1990s Hong Kong, and the social significances of the historical phenomenon Zishu and the movie *Ji Sor*. 1940s are the last few years for Zishu; in 1997, the Hong Kong cinema was also moving to the end of its golden age. Set in World War II, also a time of overwhelming turbulence and confusion, *Ji Sor* presents the fear and anxiety that the audience of 1997 can relate to. As the young protagonist Jiahui finds herself connecting to her old maid Huan Gu, the modern Hong Kong (and its Cantonese culture) also had a conversation with its past. Culture, courage, and lineage were both onscreen and off-screen.

*Ji Sor* is an ambitious work in part due to the resistance against the feudal marriage customs, homophobia, and male hegemony. The intentional vilifying of male characters in *Ji Sor* is very apparent. From the 40s to the 90s, the male characters are the absolute villains here. Throughout the movie, it is almost impossible to empathize with them in any way. On the contrary, women in *Ji Sor* make decisions for themselves and

hold to their own principles. Challenging the traditional values, the lifelong waiting and searching between Yu Huan and Yi Huan that touched all viewers already go beyond a regular love story. With great empathy and respect for women, *Ji Sor* praises the fine qualities of women, recognizes the social roles played by women, and calls for the real gender equality.

Some call the ideology of homosexuality in *Ji Sor* into question: that the homosexual relationship here is developed out of hatred towards men, and is mere situational homosexuality behavior rather than “true love.” As a former prostitute, Yu Huan has to deal with all kinds of guys for years. After marriage, Yu Huan’s husband again betrays her. Yi Huan has a father who does not take good care of her. It is also impossible for her to meet other men in both Gu Po Wu and sericulture factories. Yi Huan completely loses hope in men after Wang Cheng’s betrayal. I agree that situational homosexuality can be used to explain the formation of many Qi Xiangzhi among the Zishunu community. Many Zishunu live and work in their sericulture factories. They live in a single-sex environment for years, plus involvement with men is absolutely forbidden. It is obvious that the relationship between Yi Huan and Yu Huan is not a mere result of the absence of men. Meanwhile, the storyline is also valid and logical if we change the gender of one of the protagonists. The whole story can be told more simply as falling love with someone else as one’s former relationship ends. In any case, it should not matter how the love between two people is formed. Human emotions can be developed through various ways. In *Ji Sor*, Yi Huan and Yu Huan get to know each other and then fall in love, develop a stronger relationship in a time of war. If we don’t normally

question the genuineness of a heterosexual relationship formed under such circumstance, why should we raise doubt here?

Many simply view *Ji Sor* as an LGBT film, a tag that limited its spreading in the Mainland China market. The underrepresentation of Zishu in media also partially leads to its overlooked significance in the contemporary culture. As the major communication channel, some films called attention to a few rarely known traditions in the past years. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2011), which is adapted from Lisa See's novel and directed by Wayne Wang (director of *The Joy Luck Club* (1993)), was quite influential internationally. This movie used an all-star cast, attracted a great amount of funding, and went through a huge marketing campaign. It was not very well received by the academic world, and the Chinese audience for it includes many western interpretations on Chinese culture. Following the release of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, the media was prevailed by introductions and studies regarding the custom "Lao Tong" portrayed in the movie. Focusing on the mysterious and ancient aspect of "Lao Tong," and the notion of "friends for life," *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* circumvented the direct discussion of homosexuality. In recent years, there are also a few works in the Western cinema that excellently capture a kind of nonsexual intimacy beyond friendship that helps the two protagonists gain new understandings of their lives. For instance, *Like Sunday, Like Rain* (2014) by Frank Whaley and *Begin Again* (2014) by John Carney are exemplary works of such. These films, similar to *Ji Sor*, often involve unexpected self-discovery journey for both. I think a possible production about the custom of Zishu could also involve similar storylines to further emphasize women independence and empowerment. Not to say that

filmmakers should simply conform to censorship and avoid sensitive topics, where in fact films should serve the exactly opposite purpose and arouse awareness in underappreciated areas. The topic of Zishu does not necessarily involve homosexuality. Even so, there are few media representations in the past decades. The whole notion of the absence of marriage and its threat to male dominance is still not accepted in our hegemonic culture a hundred years later.

## Sexual Identities Politics in Hong Kong Cinema

### 1990s: A New Era for Hong Kong

As one of the world's leading international financial centers, Hong Kong experienced rapid economic growth since mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Colonized by Britain for over 150 years, Hong Kong developed a distinctive cognition of culture identity and nationalism. As part of Chinese national cinema, the Hong Kong film industry is also widely influenced by Western culture. The unique history and social conditions of Hong Kong promoted the formation of such an eclectic and hybrid cinema. Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hong Kong was undergoing an intensive period of transformations. The vigorous shifts in economy, politics, and culture, plus the sensitive attitudes towards the transfer of sovereignty, further deepened the anxiety of self-identification and culture identity. “The assertion of sexual identity accompanied the insistence that all people be granted access to the public arena, and a space emerged for the meeting of Hong Kong film, independent media production, and New Queer Cinema.”<sup>14</sup> Produced within this political and social context, Jacob Cheung’s *Ji Sor* embodies explorations of personal liberty, sexuality, and independence, with the underlying discussion of democratic inclusion and legal rights.

Starting from the 1997 transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong cinema gained more international attention, especially from scholars of Mainland China and the United States.

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14. Esther M. K. Cheung, Gina Marchetti, and See-Kam Tan, *Hong Kong screenscapes from the new wave to the digital frontier* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Univ. Press, 2011).

As an international financial center, Hong Kong's movie industry also manifested obvious features of commercial productions. Official studies on Hong Kong film industry, which was loaded with movies made only for box office, started very late. Even the Hong Kong cinema itself only started publishing collected critical movie reviews with the happening of Hong Kong International Film Festival (founded in 1976).<sup>15</sup> I. C. Jarvie, as the first Western academic to write a book on Hong Kong cinema, emphasizes the sociological value of the Hong Kong cinema in his *Window on Hong Kong: A Sociological Study of the Hong Kong Film Industry and its Audience*.<sup>16</sup> The Hong Kong cinema is a “window” on the colonial society. The film industry does not only offer us artistic values but also tells us what the society we are in looks like.

For roughly 30 years from the mid-1970s to the late 1990s, Hong Kong cinema enjoyed its “golden age.” Hong Kong dominated the East Asian business and media markets. Walking into a DVD store in Mainland China in the 80s, one would find nothing but Hong Kong movies. While many of the earlier studies focused on the martial art films of Hong Kong, which is extremely popular in Mainland China and other places, the landscape of Hong Kong cinema was transformed by a group of young directors in a very short span. Collectively known as the Hong Kong New Wave, this brand new force emerged in the late 70s, including Ann Hui, Tsui Hark, Patrick Tam, John Woo, etc., opened up a new terrain. Most of them had received film training overseas and joined

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15. Ching Yau, *Filming margins: Tang Shu Shuen, a forgotten Hong Kong woman director* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004).

16. Ian Charles. Jarvie, *Window on Hong Kong: a sociological study of the Hong Kong film industry and its audience* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 1977).

local television broadcasting institutions, left the television industry and entered the film industry after gaining practical experience.<sup>17</sup> By the mid-80s, there's not much talk about the New Wave as the earlier initiators were partially absorbed into the mainstream, but redefined and became the mainstream at the same time. However, as the New Wave continued to gain more international attention and more great works were produced by newly joined filmmakers, a second wave was culminated. New Wave filmmakers brought new life to and broadened the possibilities of Hong Kong cinema. The Second Wave (1984 - 1990s) produced probably the most interesting works of Hong Kong cinema as a whole. Wong Kar-wai, Stanley Kwan, Eddie Fong, Clara Law, Mabel Cheung and Jacob Cheung are all major filmmakers of the Second Wave.<sup>18</sup>

As a major figure of the Second Wave, Jacob Cheung is known for his realistic and romantic style. In fact, there was a popular term called “Wen Zhang Wu Xu” in Hong Kong cinema at the time, meaning Zhang is the best in romance and melodrama and Xu is the best when it comes to action and martial arts. Here, “Zhang” refers to Jacob Cheung (Zhang Zhiliang) and “Xu” is Tsui Hark (Xu Ke). Jacob Cheung excels in poetically depicting emotions of various characters in detail while truthfully reflecting the society they are in. No matter who the central figures are, humanity, courage, and love are always the keywords in Cheung's films. Cheung's directorial debut *Lai Shi, China's Last Eunuch* (1988) is based on a novel about the last surviving eunuch of Chinese

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17. Tong Cheuk. Pak, *Hong Kong new wave cinema: 1978-2000* (Bristol, GB: Intellect, 2008).

18. Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong cinema: the extra dimensions* (London: BFI, 2007), 160.



history. His second movie *Beyond the Sunset* (1989) that won the Hong Kong Film Award Best Film is about families and the elderly. Cheung's most mentioned by the academics, *Cageman* (1992) features dramas of the underclass resistance and survival in the face of capital exploitation.

Stories of big men are of course exciting and theatrical, but the courage and persistence of ordinary people shown in times of tumultuous changes are rather valuable. 20 years later, Cheung's fellow filmmakers such as Tsui Hark and Peter Chan became some of the most renowned names in today's Chinese-language cinema. Jacob Cheung, however, still struggles with budgets and investments. A few of his recent and more commercialized works backed by companies from Mainland China (*Rest on Your Shoulder* (2011), *The White Haired Witch of Lunar Kingdom* (2014)) did not help, but if anything, harmed Cheung's reputation in the critical world. While moving to commercial martial arts films with bigger budgets, Cheung did not let go his original aspirations. In a recent interview, Jacob Cheung talked about the obstacles of producing films focusing on social issues, which were not popular among investors nowadays. Currently preparing a movie about homeless people in Hong Kong, Cheung still hopes such works would be accepted by the Mainland market.<sup>19</sup>

### The Landscape of Gender Identities in Hong Kong Cinema

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19. “专访《白发魔女传》导演张之亮 ‘我真的不敢在内地拍社会问题’ (Interview with Jacob Cheung: ‘I am too afraid to make movies about social issues in Mainland China market’),” Mtime, , accessed April 10, 2017, <http://news.mtime.com/2014/07/31/1529741-all.html>.

Gender egalitarian is one of the major themes of Hong Kong New Wave. Three kinds explorations of sexual identities can be seen in Hong Kong cinema in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century: the ambiguity of characters' gender identities, the focus on female characters as sole protagonists, and the growing visibility of homosexuality.

The ambiguity of gender identities is often seen in martial arts or films related to ancient Chinese operas. Using Beijing opera as a backdrop, *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) obliquely depicts homosexuality in association to transvestite performance. *Peony Pavilion* (2001), directed by Yonfan and starring Joey Wang (Wang Zuxian) and Rie Miyazawa, is a love story between two women that starts from a co-performance of the Kun Opera Peony Pavilion. Even *M. Butterfly* (1993), the American romantic drama set in China and France, also borrows the transvestite nature of Chinese opera to blur the gender line. One cinematic image that one has to bring up when it comes to Hong Kong martial arts movie or Hong Kong cinema at all is Dongfang Bubai ("Invincible East") portrayed by Brigitte Lin (Lin Qingxia) in *Swordsman II*. As a prerequisite of a secret but powerful martial arts manual, Dongfang Bubai castrated himself to master the skills. These often involve the male characters reaching to traditional feminine images, or the other way around. *Peony Pavilion* is also an example of films that focus on female characters, while male characters only serve as subordinates. Most of the films with female protagonists and do not contain any intentional ambiguity in gender identities are biographical. *Ruan Lingyu* (1993, also known as *Center Stage*) by Stanley Kwan (Guan Jinpeng) and *The Soong Sisters* (1997) by Mabel Cheung (Zhang Wanting) are two symbolic works of such kind.

Before the 1990s, it has been possible only to “hint at homosexuality or to pathologize it.”<sup>20</sup> During the culmination of Hong Kong cinema, various representations of homosexuality started to emerge. The 1990s is a milestone for gay and lesbians rights movement in Hong Kong. The male homosexual conduct was a criminal offense punishable by a maximum term of life imprisonment and became legal after 1991.<sup>21</sup> While the Legislative Council decriminalized male homosexuality, the Sexual Orientation Discrimination Ordinance (SODO) that has been discussed by Hong Kong society since the 90s was never passed, despite the efforts of different parties and activist groups. The LGBT-themed movies of the 90s told stories of the homosexuality community and also became part of its culture. These works, often directed by important directors and featuring all-star casts, entered the mainstream cinema. The most prominent example is *Farewell My Concubine*, which won the 1993 Palme d'Or and 1994 Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film. A few other important works include *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) by Ang Lee, which made the global audience more aware of the conflicts between the Western culture and traditional Chinese values within the Chinese diaspora; *Happy Together* (1997) by Wong Kar-wai, starring Leslie Cheung (Zhang Guorong) and Tony Leung Chiu-wai (Liang Chaowei); *Bishonen* (1998) by Yonfan, featuring Stephen Fung and Daniel Wu; *Lan Yu* (2001) by Stanley Kwan. On the other

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20. Laikwan Pang and Day Wong, *Masculinities and Hong Kong cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 57.

21. Hong Kong, Legislative Council of Hong Kong, 立法局会议过程正式记录一九九零年七月十一日星期三 (*Legislative Council of Hong Kong Meeting Official Records, 1990, July 11*) (Hong Kong, 1990).

side, the LGBT theme was even more restricted, and still is, in Mainland China. The first homosexuality movie of Chinese cinema *East Palace, West Palace* (1996), which won multiple awards overseas, was never released in China. The first lesbian-themed movie *Fish and Elephant* (2001) was released in Canada in 2002 and was only screened in Mainland China once at an LGBT film festival before government officials shut down the festival.<sup>22</sup>

Today, homosexuality films drifted away from the mainstream and commercial theaters, moved to independent and underground productions. Stepping into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, homosexuality films moved more towards auteur and autobiographical styles. Most local gay and lesbian-themed works are made by homosexual filmmakers. In the 2009 Hong Kong International Film Festival, the three homosexuality movies featured - *Permanent Residence by Scud* (Yunxiang), *Soundless Wind Chime* by Kit Hung (Hong Rongjie), *End of Love* by Simon Chung (Zhong Desheng), are all written and directed by the directors based on personal stories. Meanwhile, the development of the whole Hong Kong cinema stagnated in the past ten years. It also lacks variations with crime-action, martial arts, and romance being the three dominant styles. The homosexuality visibility in today's Hong Kong cinema is not comparable to that of the 1990s, either in terms of quantity or production scale. Given its market size and acceptance level of the general audience, the independent film industry hasn't been able to produce works that are widely acknowledged by society.

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22. International Bar Association, et al., *Sexuality and Human Rights* (Haworth Press), 182, [https://books.google.com/books?id=\\_1ShAwAAQBAJ](https://books.google.com/books?id=_1ShAwAAQBAJ).

*Ji Sor: A Real Woman's Movie*

Gay male identities have been subordinated to heterosexuality and the hegemonic masculinity. Even when it comes to LGBT films alone, the growing gay visibility also outpaced the lesbian-themed movies. An androcentric culture had always existed inside the system of Hong Kong cinema. Although the Hong Kong cinema presented many lovable or admirable female characters, its main theme is about the heroism, valiance, righteousness and masculinity of the male protagonists. Such inclination is also not startling given that martial arts and crime-action films as the two major categories Hong Kong feature film. In *Ashes of Time*, one of Wong Kar-wai's most critically appreciated works, the beautiful Maggie Cheung walks around and stays as a plain image in Ouyang Feng's mind. In *Police Story*, in *The Killer*, in most movies, women are only there to be saved and reflect the heroism and gentleness of men. The beauty of women is not power, like any female character in a James Bond or Transformers movie. At the end of the day, most female characters still serve as men's auxiliary.

Many films, although telling stories about women, however, do not actually challenge the values of male hegemony. The New Wave movement, on top of its influences over the whole Hong Kong film industry, is especially significant for the development of feminism in Hong Kong films. Male filmmakers started to include more female figures into the main body of action. Women started to have more voice in the cinematic world rather than just being expressed. A real woman's movie is not simply one with female protagonists, as defined by author and former playwright Hui Chen, but

one where the female characters have full autonomy.<sup>23</sup> *Ji Sor* is an exceptional film that represents the inner power of two ordinary women and achieves such representation without making them conform to the hegemonic meaning of masculinity. Jacob Cheung establishes the images of two women under lifetime oppression from the angle of homosexuality, and revolutionarily breaks the traditional androcentric values. The male characters in *Ji Sor* are not given much screen time: they are easily intimidated and heartless; they mistreat women and never take on responsibilities when facing adversities. The merits of the strong and devoted female characters are shown through their mutual salvation and emphasized further through such contrast. Some later works, such as *The Lion Roars* (2002), also adopt the technique of representing female characters in escape and rebellion under extreme conditions and absolute hegemony.

When asked for other examples of real women's movies in the Hong Kong cinema, Hui Chen thinks there are only two others: *A Simple Life* (2011) by Ann Hui and *Queen of Temple Street* (1990) by Lawrence Ah Mon.<sup>24</sup> The story of *A Simple Life* is between a middle-aged filmmaker Roger Leung and Chun-to (Taojie), a maidservant who has worked for his family for decades. Taojie is one of the Zishunu who became housemaids (Majie) after the sericulture industry collapsed. Loved by many, Taojie is in control of her life, knows what she wants, and has great influences on Roger. Although as

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23. “陳慧：真正港產女性電影極少，除了《桃姐》，就是《自梳》和《廟街皇后》 (Chen Hui: There are very few real Hong Kong woman movie, besides *Taojie*, there's *Ji Sor* and *Queen of Temple Street*),” 夠POP, September 01, 2015, , accessed April 10, 2017.

24. See note 23 above.

a servant, Taojie is the one who drives the action in the movie. *Queen of Temple Street*, possibly “Hong Kong’s saltiest mother-daughter tale,”<sup>25</sup> is a heartbreaking story between a madam Hua who rules a brothel and her estranged daughter Yan, a teen dropout defiantly following in her mother’s path.

It is worth noticing that the protagonists in the three movies are either Zishunu or prostitutes. As we expand our span to more films that are viewed as women’s movies, such as Tsui Hark’s *Peking Opera Blues* (1986), Stanley Kwan’s *Rouge* (1988), *Durian Durian* (2000), etc., we can see that the strong female characters appear in media representations are often Zishunu, prostitutes, with the addition of opera actresses, who had very low social status (similar to prostitutes). Zishunu, as a specific historical phenomenon, can only be protagonists of certain films due to limitations in time and geography; the identity of prostitutes, however, can be used more widely across history. Making a living on their own, Zishunu who swear off marriage and men and prostitutes who have to be with men day and night are two identities that seem exactly the opposite at first, but actually very similar in a way. One may say that Zishunu and prostitutes face greater adversities in life than a married woman. For better dramatic effects and to present female protagonists with full autonomy, filmmakers continue making such choices for decades. Yet I cannot stop wondering: while it may make sense for us to present female characters outside marriage as supposedly they would have more

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25. Paul Fonoroff, “Film appreciation: Lawrence Lau’s *Queen of Temple Street* (1990),” *South China Morning Post*, July 09, 2015, , accessed April 11, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/magazines/48-hours/article/1825143/film-appreciation-lawrence-lau-queen-temple-street-1990>.

responsibility, it is our inability to present powerful women within marriage that really puzzles me. Does that mean marriage necessarily impede women's self-empowerment and reduce their autonomy?

If we take a look at today's media market, with the major targeting audience being female, it is ironic that the market is still filled with loads of love stories that revolve around men. The leading female characters, often innocent and kind, make the male protagonists look smarter and more affectionate. Even though more and more independent and successful woman figures start to appear on screen, the big happy endings for these characters are still finding "the guy." If the ideal life portrayed by works of male gaze and works made for the female audience is the same, then this phenomenon may not be a product of male dominance alone.

For thousands of years, women were forced to give up their autonomy in marriage and serve as subordinates. At the beginning of *Ji Sor*, when Yi Huan's mother tries to persuade her daughter to go back with them, she says to Yi Huan: "this is the fate of women." These traditional values are so deeply rooted in the Chinese culture that women give up their rights because they believe it is part of the natural duty of being a wife or a woman. More than a century ago, Zishunu took the extreme path of lifelong chastity to fight against the extreme oppression. There are Zishunu who really want to be saved from the trouble of marriage and kids; there are Zishunu who are lesbians and do not want to step into heterosexual marriages; there are also Zishunu like Yi Huan who have a lover and want a family but cannot due to family conditions. Foot binding was banned; polygyny was abolished; new marriage laws were established. The marriage conditions



are largely improved, and we do not need to take the path of Zishu just to stay single. Yet the cinematic world, the looking glass of our society and values, reveals some remaining problems to us. Society cannot take all the blame if we voluntarily relinquish things we think we should have.

## Conclusion

Marriages in feudal China have various purposes and functions, but love is not one of them. It is not surprising that many women gradually equate “marriage” to pure misery under absolute male dominance. The unique historical and cultural customs in the Pearl River Delta area, the development of local mechanical industry, and the influences of Western culture all led to Zishu, women’s group rebellions against marriages. Zishunu, the group of women who swear off marriage for life, still have to adopt the traditional marital symbols like hair buns and wedding ceremony or get married formally through ghost marriages, Buluo Fujia, Mai Menkou, etc. The emancipation of Zishunu, although as a huge advancement in the feminism in China, is not a complete liberation. Zishunu have to endure imaginable pressure to step away from the feudal marriages, but Zishu cannot transform the orthodox rites. Women emancipation cannot be achieved by women celibacy.

*Ji Sor*, a groundbreaking work in lesbian-themed movies, beautifully depicts this special and unparalleled historical phenomenon in detail. It vividly presents the progress of women’s social status and women’s own psychological development across decades, and successfully illustrates the virtues of the female protagonists including their kindness, diligence, and persistence. Regrettably, the formerly vibrant Hong Kong cinema has passed its golden age. The big-name Hong Kong directors turned to the investors and audience of Mainland China. The LGBT theme is still under censorship, and feminism movements are also very restricted in Mainland China. Film production is a streamlined process involving enormous budget, celebrities, and a lot of work of CG. Films that focus

on social issues that often raise questions to the administration can only seek overseas funding and cannot be released in China.

As long as the androcentric culture still dominates our society, women would still appear as products of male gaze on screen. Twenty years after *Ji Sor* was released, we can't hold a candle to the height *Ji Sor* achieved in feminism. If we haven't stepped forward too much in the cinematic world, how much has happened in reality on the understanding of gender egalitarian and sexual identities? As time passes by, more and more Zishunu gradually passed away. The rarely known custom will lose its last witnesses very soon. I sincerely hope that their efforts will not be in vain. From Zishu to the feminism movements happening around the world today, women's self-reflection and self-realization should be at the predominant position, prior to interrogating the unfair distribution of resources in the society. It is important to realize that women should take initiatives to pursue what they want instead of waiting for the society, or men, to give. I have friends who do not want to be housewives but choose to conform to the teachings of their parents; I also have friends who are too afraid to say that they want to stay at home because it is not "feminist" enough. I believe it does not matter what kind of life a woman wants. If we start to develop a new set of standards of a "good" woman, we probably did not make any advancement at all. We would be no different from the people who wrote down San Cong, Si De, and Qi Chu. The right that a woman should have, just like a real women's movie, is the autonomy to make her own decisions.

### Glossary

	Simplified Chinese	Pin Yin	Cantonese Romanization (if applicable)	
<i>A Simple Life</i> (2011)	桃姐	Tao Jie	Tou Ze	an award-winning Hong Kong drama film directed by Ann Hui, starring Andy Lau and Deanie Yip
Ang Lee	李安	Li An		a Taiwanese-born film director, screenwriter and producer. Director of <i>Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragons</i> , <i>Brokeback Mountain</i> , <i>The Wedding Banquet</i> , etc.
Ann Hui	许鞍华	Xu Anhua	Hui On-Wah	one of the most critically acclaimed filmmakers amongst the Hong Kong New Wave; director of <i>A Simple Life</i>
Ashes of Time	东邪西毒	Dong Xie Xi Du		a 1994 Hong Kong film written and directed by <i>Wong Kar-wai</i>
Ban Zhao	班昭	Ban Zhao		a Han Dynasty female intellectual. Author of <i>Lessons for Women</i>
<i>Bishonen / Beauty</i> (1998)	美少年之恋	Mei Shao Nian Zhi Lian		a 1998 Hong Kong romantic drama film about an ill-fated romance, written and directed by Yonfan
Brigitte Lin	林青霞	Lin Qingxia	Lin Ching-hsia	a Taiwanese actress, regarded as an icon of Chinese cinema
Buluo Fujia	不落夫家	Bu Luo Fu Jia	But Lok Fu Gah	a custom in South China that wives do not have to stay in Fujia after marriage
<i>Beyond the Sunset</i> (1989)	飞越黄昏	Fei Yue Huang Hun		a 1989 film by Jacob Cheung, starring Bo-Bo Fung, Cecilia Yip, and Richard Ng
Carina Lau	刘嘉玲	Liu Jialin	Lau Kar-ling	a famous Chinese actress who starred as Yu Huan in <i>Ji Sor</i> , married to Tony Leung

<i>Cageman</i> (1992)	笼民	Long Min		a 1992 award-winning film by Jacob Cheung
Clara Law	罗卓瑶	Luo Zhuoyao	Cheuk-yiu Law	a Hong Kong second wave film director, married to Eddie Fong
Chongxi	冲喜	Chong Xi		to arrange a wedding for the dangerously sick with the aim of driving away the devil and the disease
Charlie Young	杨采妮	Yang Caini	Young Choi-nei	or Charlie Yeung, a Hong Kong actress who starred as Yi Huan in <i>Ji Sor</i>
Daniel Wu	吴彦祖	Wu Yanzu	Wu Yin-cho	an American actor based in Hong Kong
<i>Durian Durian</i> (2000)	榴莲飘飘	Liu Lian Piao Piao		a 2000 Hong Kong film directed by Fruit Chan
<i>East Palace, West Palace</i> (1996)	东宫西宫	Dong Gong Xi Gong		a 1996 Chinese film directed by Zhang Yuan; the first homosexuality Mainland Chinese movie
<i>End of Love</i> (2009)	爱到尽	Ai Dao Jin	Oi Do Chun	a homosexuality themed Hong Kong movie by indie filmmaker Simon Chung
Eddie Fong	方令正	Fang Ling Zheng	Fong Ling Ching	a Hong Kong screenwriter and director, married to Clara Law
<i>Farewell My Concubine</i> (1993)	霸王别姬	Ba Wang Bie Ji		a Chinese drama film directed by Chen Kaige; one of the central works of the Fifth Generation movement
Fujia	夫家	Fu Jia	Fu Gah	a woman's husband's house/family
<i>Fish and Elephant</i> (2001)	今年夏天	Jin Nian Xia Tian		the first lesbian-themed movie of Chinese cinema
Guan Yin	观音	Guan Yin		an East Asian bodhisattva associated with compassion
Gu Po Wu	姑婆屋	Gu Po Wu	Gu Por Uk	the name of the group house that Zishunu live together in

Gua Aleh	归亚蕾	Gui Yalei		or Grace Gua, a Chinese actress who starred as Huan Gu in <i>Ji Sor</i>
Hanming Ye	叶汉明	Ye Hanming	Yip Hon-ming	a CUHK historian, chairwoman of the Department of History
<i>Happy Together</i> (1997)	春光乍泄	Chun Guang Zha Xie	Chun Gwong Cha Sit	a homosexuality themed Hong Kong romance film directed by Wong Kar-wai, starring Leslie Cheung and Tony Leung
Kit Hung	洪荣杰	Hong Rongjie	Hung Wing Kit	an independent filmmaker from Hong Kong. Director of <i>Soundless Wind Chime</i>
Hui Chen	陈慧	Chen Hui		a Hong Kong writer and playwright
<i>I-Li</i>	仪礼	Yi Li		or “Etiquette and Ceremonial”, a Chinese classic text about Zhou Dynasty social behavior and ceremonial ritual
Jacob Cheung	张之亮	Zhiliang Zhang	Cheung Chi-leung	a Hong Kong film director, producer, screenwriter, and actor. Director of <i>Cageman</i> , <i>Ji Sor</i> , <i>A Battle of Wits</i> , etc.
John Woo	吴宇森	Wu Yusen		a Chinese-born Hong Kong film director, writer, and producer; the owner of Lion Rock Productions.
Jin Zhulong	浸猪笼	Jin Zhu Long		a death punishment for adultery in ancient China, also used to punish Zishunu who gets involved with men
Joey Wang	王祖贤	Wang Zuxian	Wong Cho-ye	a famous Hong Kong based Taiwanese-born actress
<i>The Killer</i> (1989)	喋血双雄	Die Xue Shuang Xiong		a 1989 Hong Kong action film written and directed by John Woo
<i>Lai Shi, China's Last Eunuch</i> (1988)	中国最后一个太监	Zhong Guo Zui Hou Yi Ge Tai Jian		a Hong Kong historical drama film directed by Jacob Cheung; also Cheung's directorial debut

<i>Lan Yu</i> (2001)	蓝宇	Lan Yu		a gay-themed Hong Kong-Chinese film by Stanley Kwan
Lao Tong	老同	Lao Tong		a type of relationship within Chinese culture, which was practiced in Hunan, that bonded two girls together for eternity as kindred sisters; portrayed in <i>Snow Flower and Secret Fan</i>
Lawrence Ah Mon	刘国昌	Liu Guochang	Lau Kwok Cheong	a Hong Kong film director, known for lurid exploration of the problems of the poor in modern Hong Kong
<i>Lessons for Women</i>	女诫	Nu Jie		A work by the Han Dynasty female intellectual Ban Zhao that outlines the four virtues women must abide by
Leslie Cheung	张国荣	Zhang Guorong	Cheung Kwok-wing	a well-known bisexual Hong Kong actor and singer; one of the founding fathers of Cantopop; starred in <i>Ashes of Time</i> , <i>Happy Together</i> , <i>Days of Being Wild</i> , etc.
<i>The Lion Roars</i> (2002)	河东狮吼	He Dong Shi Hou		a Hong Kong comedy film produced and directed by Joe Ma
<i>M. Butterfly</i> (1993)	蝴蝶君	Hu Die Jun		an American romantic drama film directed by David Cronenberg
Maggie Cheung	张曼玉	Zhang Manyu	Cheung Man-yuk	a famous Hong Kong actress raised in Britain and Hong Kong
Majie	妈姐	Ma Jie	Maa Ze	"mother sister", used to refer Zishunu who became domestic helpers
Mabel Cheung	张婉婷	Zhang Wanting		a leading Hong Kong film director: works include: <i>An Autumn's Tale</i> , <i>The Soong Sisters</i> , <i>Echoes of the Rainbow</i> , etc.

Niangjia	娘家	Niang Jia	Neung Gah	a woman's original family (the family she's born in)
Patrick Tam	谭家明	Tan Jiaming	Tam Kar-ming	a Hong Kong film director and editor; known as the mentor of Wong Kar-wai
<i>Peony Pavilion</i> (2001)	游园惊梦	You Yuan Jing Meng		a Hong Kong drama film directed by Yonfan, featuring a complex love struggle between two women
<i>Peking Opera Blues</i> (1986)	刀马旦	Dao Ma Dan	Do Ma Daan	a Hong Kong film directed by Tsui Hark, combining comedy, Hong Kong action, and serious drama scenes involving Peking Opera
Peter Chan	陈可辛	Chen Kexin	Chan Ho-sun	a leading film director and producer; works include: <i>Comrades: Almost a Lover</i> , <i>Perhaps Love</i> , <i>He's a Woman</i> , <i>She's a Man</i> , etc.
<i>Permanent Residence</i> (2009)	永久居留	Yong Jiu Ju Liu		a gay-themed Hong Kong film by Scud
<i>Police Story</i>	警察故事	Jing Cha Gu Shi		a film series comprises six Hong Kong crime-action films and one spinoff film, starring Jackie Chan
Qi Chu	七出	Qi Chu		"seven outs", the seven reasons that a husband can lawfully divorce his wife
Qi Xiangzhi	契相知	Qi Xiang Zhi		a lesbian relationship between two Zishunu
Qi Jie	七姐	Qi Jie		the seventh daughter of the heaven; one of the goddesses admired by Zishunu
<i>Queen of Temple Street</i> (1990)	庙街皇后	Miao Jie Huang Hou		a Hong Kong film directed by Lawrence Ah Mon with a category III rating in Hong Kong



<i>Ruan Lingyu / Center Stage</i> (1993)	阮玲玉	Ruan Lingyu	Yuen Ling-yuk	a Hong Kong film directed by Stanley Kwan, starring Maggie Cheung
<i>Rest on Your Shoulder</i> (2011)	肩上蝶	Jian Shang Die		a Chinese fantasy film directed by Jacob Cheung
<i>Rouge</i> (1988)	胭脂扣	Yan Zhi Kou		a Hong Kong film directed by Stanley Kwan, starring Leslie Cheung and Anita Mui
Sancong	三从	San Cong		"three obedience", a woman should obey to her father, husband, and son as written in <i>I-Li</i>
Scud	云翔（郑云翔）	Yun Xiang	Danny Cheng Wan-Cheung	a Mainland China-born and raised Hong Kong Chinese film producer, screenwriter and now film director. Director of <i>Permanent Residence</i>
Shunde	顺德	Shun De	Shun Tak	a district in the city of Foshan in the Pearl River Delta, Guangdong Province, China; The most important area of Zishunu custom
<i>Soundless Wind Chime</i> (2009)	无声风铃	Wu Sheng Feng Ling		a gay-themed independent film directed by Kit Hung; nominee for the Berlin International Film Festival's Teddy Award
Stanley Kwan	关锦鹏	Guan Jinpeng		a Hong Kong second wave film director and producer; known for his works focusing on female characters
Stephen Fung	冯德伦	Feng Delun	Fung Tak-lun	a Hong Kong actor, singer, writer, and film director
Side	四德	Si De		"four virtues": proper virtue, proper speech, proper countenance, and proper conduct, as described in Ban Zhao's <i>Lessons for Women</i>

<i>Snow Flower and the Secret Fan</i> (2011)	雪花秘扇	Xue Hua Mi Shan		a historical drama film based on the novel by Lisa See; directed by Wayne Wang
<i>Swordsman II</i> (1992)	笑傲江湖 II: 东方不败	Xiao Ao Jiang Hu II: Dong Fang Bu Bai		or <i>The Legend of the Swordsman</i> , a Hong Kong Wuxia film
<i>The Soong Sisters</i> (1997)	宋家皇朝	Song Jia Huang Chao		a Hong Kong historical drama film based on the lives of the Soong sisters
Simon Chung	钟德胜	Zhong Desheng	Cheung Tak-sing	a Hong Kong film director; director of <i>End of Love</i>
Tongyangxi	童养媳	Tong Yang Xi		child bride
Tony Leung	梁朝伟	Liang Chaowei	Leung Chiu-wai	a famous Hong Kong actor and singer; winner of Cannes Festival for Best Actor for his role in <i>In the Mood for Love</i> ; married to Carina Lau
Tin Hau	天后	Tian Hou	Tin Hau	or Mazu, a Chinese sea goddess; admired by Zishunu
Tsui Hark	徐克	Xu Ke	Tsui Hark	a leading Chinese film director, producer and screenwriter; works include: <i>Huang Feihong</i> , <i>Green Snake</i> , <i>Seven Swords</i> , etc.
Theresa Lee	李绮红	Li Qihong	Lee Yee Hung	a Hong Kong-born Canadian actress; starred as Jia Hui in <i>Ji Sor</i>
<i>The Wedding Banquet</i> (1993)	喜宴	Xi Yan		a 1993 film about a gay Taiwanese immigrant man and the following trouble between him and his family
Wen Zhang Wu Xu	文张武徐	Wen Zhang Wu Xu		a term meaning Jacob Cheung is the best in romance and melodrama and Xu is the best when it comes to action and Wuxia films

Wayne Wang	王穎	Wang Ying		a Hong Kong-born American film director; works include: <i>The Joy Luck Club</i> , <i>Snow Flower and the Secret Fan</i> , <i>Smoke</i> , etc.
<i>The White Haired Witch of Lunar Kingdom</i> (2014)	白发魔女传之明月天国	Bai Fa Mo Nu Zhuan: Ming Yue Tian Guo		a Chinese Wuxia-fantasy 3D film directed by Jacob Cheung
Wong Kar-wai	王家卫	Wang Jiawei	Wong Kar-wai	an internationally renowned Hong Kong second wave filmmaker; works include: <i>In the Mood for love</i> , <i>Chungking Express</i> , <i>2046</i> , <i>Happy Together</i> , etc.
Xiao	孝	Xiao		filial piety
Yijue	义绝	Yi Jue		a divorce system that allows women to initiate a divorce in feudal China, applies if the husband commits serious crimes such as rape and murder
Yonfan	杨凡	Yang Fan		a Taiwanese film director and photographer; works include: <i>Bishonen</i> , <i>Peony Pavilion</i> , <i>Bugis Street</i> , etc.
Zhaodi	招娣/招弟	Zhao Di		“hail a brother”, adopt a girl hoping such action could bring a boy to the family

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