

From Verbal to Visual: Pearl Buck's *Pavilion of Women* (1946) and Its Filmic Adaptation (2001)

Li Zeng, University of Louisville

Abstract

Co-written and produced by the Chinese-American-trained actress Luo Yan who also plays the leading female character in the film, *Pavilion of Women* (2001) is based on the famed author Pearl Buck's novel of the same title (1946) which, set in a town of southern China in 1938, tells the story of Madame Wu's ending her conjugal relationship with her husband on her 40th birthday and thereafter her unconsummated romantic love for the Western missionary Brother André. While being beautifully visualized in authentic Chinese sites and vividly characterized by a strong international cast for today's sociocultural and entertaining purposes, Buck's more-than-half-a-century old fictional narrative with originally cross-cultural characteristics was not successfully reassessed with post-colonial perceptions in the filmic adaptation. By creating a consummated romantic relationship between Father André and Madam Wu and a war situation to deify that love, for example, the film simplifies the subtlety and complexity confronted by Chinese people in a changing society. Moreover, the film echoes to a certain extent the stereotypical storytelling in which even the brightest member of an aboriginal community becomes bonehead to be enlightened and liberated by the righteous white messiah.

Among all existing literary genres, as Kamilla Elliott summarizes, "novels have been pronounced 'cinematic' whatever decade or style in which they were written" (Elliott, 2003, p.113). Historically, even in precinematic times, novels written by authors like Charles Dickens (1812-1870) displayed a very strong authorial visual sense and possessed certain cinematic devices, "such as the flashback and parallel editing between stories" (Magill, 1980, p.74). Perhaps mainly because of "the camera-eye" of novelists, to use Leon Edel's words, novels have found favor with filmmakers in their artistic creativity (Halperin, 1977, p.177). If there exist so many excellent filmic adaptations of great novels in the West, we should be aware that novels in China have also inspired Chinese filmmakers and become their inexhaustible sources, especially in the last two decades or so. For example, almost all Zhang Yimou's internationally-acclaimed feature films, such as *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, and *To Live*, are one way or another adaptations of popular novels of his contemporaries (Zhang, 1998, p.18). Similarly, while making their ethnographic films recently, some American-born or American-trained Chinese diasporic filmmakers, such as Wayne Wang and Luo Yan, have also turned to novels that bear cross-cultural or transnational issues and can be easily adapted into films. Wayne Wang's popular film *The Joy Luck Club* (1994) is an adaptation of Amy Tan's 1989 best-selling novel with the same title; whereas Luo Yan's *Pavilion of Women* (2001) is based upon a 1946 novel with the same title by Pearl S. Buck, a widely-read novelist of the mid-20th century. It is my interest in this short article

to discuss some aspects of the relationship between Pearl Buck's novel and Luo Yan's filmic adaptation of it. My critical focus will be on a couple of the film's problematics.

Published in 1946, the novel *Pavilion of Women* was written by Pearl S. Buck, winner of the 1938 Nobel Prize for literature. A daughter of Presbyterian missionaries, Pearl Buck spent most of her early life in China. There she experienced and observed first hand a great deal of cultural differences between East and West, traditional roles of men and women, oppression of women, and so on (Conn, 1996, pp.1-44). The novel *Pavilion of Women* is set in a town of southern China in the late 1930s, a time when Chinese people were experiencing many social changes and suffering from great historical turmoil. The central fictional character Madame Wu, a brilliant and beautiful housewife full of contradictions and authority, decides on her 40th birthday to end her twenty-four-year conjugal relationship with her husband and therefore orders an 18-year-old peasant girl to be presented to her husband as a concubine. Although her decision throws the family into an uproar, Madame Wu elegantly and detachedly manages the transition as she does everything else in this richest and most powerful family in the region. While enjoying her newly-acquired freedom alone in her own quarters by, say, reading books she was not allowed to touch before, she hires a Western priest to tutor her rebellious son, Fengmo. This free-thinking missionary, Brother André, turns out to be not only giving her son English lessons, but also bringing Western progressive humanitarianism to this feudal Chinese family. Over a period the friendship between Madame Wu and Brother André progresses, and by the time when Brother André dies after a rubbery accident, Madame Wu finds herself in deep love with the Catholic priest.

A melodrama with some cliché and stereotypes in characterization and language due in part to the author's internalized perceptions and her ensuring Western readers' consumption of her work, cross-cultural themes in *Pavilion of Women*, such as traditional China confronting unorthodox Christianity, conservative feudalism versus spiritual liberation, and questions about self-discipline and happiness in different cultures, are generally thought-provoking and sensitively presented. Placing a Chinese woman with unusually strong individualism and a premise of living for herself at the center of a large domestic relationship, the novel is seen as a work speaking to women, a novel that is, in my view, structured from a universalistic feminist perspective. In other words, starting from its provocative beginning, the novel advocates the author's idea that women are equal with men, whether in China or America.

Besides Pearl Buck's border-crossing politics in writing ethnicity, culture, and gender as mentioned above, the novel is also seen to have evident cinematic characteristics. As Peter Conn notes: "*Pavilion of Women* is strongest in a series of scenes that convincingly re-create the details and rhythms of women's daily lives inside and outside the household. Within the walls of the Wu compound, dinners are cooked and served, clothes are mended, sick children are nursed, account books are balanced, all against a background of changing seasons and the bustle of the city" (Conn, 1996, p.303). Perhaps because of its cross-cultural contents and cinematic features, the novel attracted briefly Hollywood's interest not long after it was published (Conn, 1996, p. 302).

Thanks to Hollywood's objection against certain moral issues of the novel then—some religious people didn't think it was moral for a wife to refuse to sleep with her husband (Conn, 1996, p.436), Buck's fictional narrative was not adapted into a film until more than half a century later. Co-written and produced in 2001 by the Chinese-American-trained, Hollywood-based actress Luo Yan who also plays the leading female character, the feature film *Pavilion of Women* (whose Chinese title is *Tingyuan li de nuren*) is a direct adaptation from Buck's novel. The filmic adaptation, however, bears a few dramatic changes. The major reasons for these changes were

given by Luo Yan at an interview: "It's a movie, it's an entertainment product and you need to attract audiences. The basic line [of the adapted work] is a cross-cultural love story. ... In a book you can feel and think, in a movie you have to see and hear. That's why I put fire, opera, war scenes" (Anthony, 2001, pp.1-2). Unfortunately, it is these claimed and other changes, in my opinion, that have failed to transform or translate into the film some of the most valuable things originally born in Buck's novel, such as the subtle, complicated cultural and cross-cultural interplay among characters and within their innermost. In Buck's novel, for example, the romantic love between Madame Wu and Brother André is depicted as unconsummated in reality; Madame Wu realizes her passion for this Catholic priest only after he is accidentally killed in a robbery: "She had never thought of him as a man when he was alive, but now that he was dead she saw him as a man lying dead. In his youth he must have been extremely beautiful. ... Suddenly she recognized him. 'You whom I love!' she murmured in profound astonishment" (Buck, 1946, p.210). Another example is the Sino-Japanese War. Serving as part of the changing background for this narrative mainly about domestic and cross-cultural relationships, the war situation is only briefly mentioned a couple of times in the novel. Moreover, it is worth pointing out here that different from the film which projects onto the screen a messianic white superman, the novel portrays Brother André with reasonable, realistic limitation. The following dialogue from the novel exemplifies this:

"You are very lonely," [Madame Wu] said abruptly. "All day you work among the poor and at night among the stars."

"It is true," [Brother André] agreed calmly.

"Have you never wanted a home and wife and children?" she asked.

"Madame, I once did love a woman," he replied, "and we were to be married. Then I entered into loneliness, and no longer loved her nor needed her."

"This was very unjust to her, I think," Madame Wu said with dignity.

"Yes, it was," he agreed, "and I felt it so, but I could only tell her the truth. Then I became a priest in order to follow my loneliness." (Buck, 1946, p.154)

Although adapted in the post-modern era, and beautifully visualized in authentic Chinese sites with a strong international cast led by the Oscar-nominee Willem Dafoe and Luo Yan who won top Chinese film awards, and directed by the award-winning Hong Kong director Yim Ho, Buck's more-than-half-a-century old fictional narrative with originally cross-cultural characteristics is not re-approached and reassessed with post-colonial perceptions. By creating a consummated romantic relationship between Father André (as called in the film) and Madame Wu and foregrounding the war situation to deify that love, the visual storytelling simplifies what is subtle and sophisticated in the original narrative into "a cross-cultural love story." Moreover, the filmic vision is seen to move backwards, echoing the colonially-stereotypical storytelling in which even the smartest member of an aboriginal community is in need of being liberated by the righteous white savior.

In general, Luo Yan's film displays in front of us little more than a cheap gala of highly distorted images of the Chinese people subordinate to a stereotyped white messiah. Except for Madame Wu, almost all other Chinese men and women in the film are presented as either rude or bonehead, yet to be enlightened by the white missionary. Mr. Wu, Madame Wu's husband, once described by Pearl Buck as a "handsome," "willful and proud young man" (Buck, 1946, p.2), is here in the film so selfish, so insensitive, and so much addicted to oral sex every night that he is doomed to be an evil heathen.

As the stupidity and wilderness deprive the Chinese people of their true image in the filmic product, so do the projected superman power and political correctness castrate the character of Father André. Here, the filmmaker's artistic vision is viewed further retrogressive. In Pearl Buck's art, Brother André shows tolerance and even respect for the "others" and their cultures. Listen to the following dialogue between him and Madame Wu:

"Is our Heaven your God, and is your God our Heaven?" she inquired.

"They are one and the same," he replied.

"But Little Sister Hsia told me they are not," she retorted. "She always told us to believe on the one true God, and not in our Heaven. She declared them not the same."

"In a temple there are always a few foolish ones," he said gently. "There is only one true God. He has many names."....

"If I do not believe in any?" she inquired willfully.

"God is patient," he said. "God waits. Is there not eternity?"....

"Heaven is patient," she repeated. "Heaven waits." (Buck, 1946, p.206)

The film falls short not only by making no progress in terms of Buck's view on necessary tolerance and understanding between different peoples, but also by reaffirmingly creating a powerful, generous, and righteous American missionary-doctor, to whom those docile Chinese are grateful. In the film, Father André begins his rescue by saving the life of Madame Wu's friend while serving as a midwife against the protests of her feudal family. He takes care of Chinese orphans, some of whom he saves in a big fire. He brings the science and culture of the West to educate the Wu family, especially Madame Wu, her son, and the concubine. And he is bold to pursue his feeling for Madame Wu by breaking his priestly vows. Thus depicted, the character Father André comes into line with the stereotyped notion conveyed in the white messiah movies of Hollywood (e.g., *Stargate*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, and *The Man Who Would Be King*), that is, "all it takes is one white man to rescue or transform a foreign community" (Vera and Gordon, 2003, p.40).

Such a "narcissistically involved" white messiah, for him there is only one reality, as Erich Fromm generalizes, "that of his own thought processes, feelings and needs" (Vera and Gordon, 2003, p.51). Hence the scene when Madame Wu, accompanied by Father André, sprains her ankle in a rainy opening, André carries her to the safety of a barn and thereafter begins to kiss and make love to her without questioning the moral and religious liabilities of such acts.

It is in a war scene claimed by the filmmaker to be an innovation for today's sociocultural and entertaining purposes that the film culminates the white supremacy. The Japanese troops are just invading the town, bombing, raping, mass murdering, and burning. In the chaos Madame Wu, after leaving her husband and family, is looking for Father André and his adopted orphans. Having found the children but not André, Madame Wu is trapped together with them in a place which is surrounded by Japanese soldiers. When Father André comes to where Madame Wu and the children are, he finds a Japanese soldier is about to harm the children and her. After crushing down that Japanese soldier, to distract other Japanese soldiers' attention, André runs away in an opposite direction followed by Japanese soldiers who kill him at last. By self-sacrifice in order to save the lives of Madame Wu, his lover, and of his orphans, Father André, an outcast of his own society, as told in the film (for that matter in the novel as well), redeems himself as well as the Chinese natives in the Anti-Japanese battle. Father André's heroic, superman-like action, in my view, echoes to a large extent that of the white savior in Hollywood films who is stereotypically "the great leader who saves blacks from slavery or oppression, rescues people of color from

poverty and disease, or leads Indians in battle for their dignity and survival” (Vera and Gordon, 2003, p.33).

So far we have briefly discussed some aspects of the relationship between Pearl Buck’s novel, *Pavilion of Women*, and Luo Yan’s filmic adaptation of it with the same title. Although adapted in the post-modern era, Buck’s 1946 fictional narrative, which originally has certain in-depth cross-cultural characteristics, is reassessed by the filmmaker in certain vulgar, commercial-oriented perceptions. The film’s portrayal of Madame Wu in her convenient love with Father André after ending her conjugal relationship with her husband is full of ridicule and cliché, and the forbidden love affair between the two is seen to develop from no ground other than her being enamored of the white messiah’s overwhelming benevolence and racial supremacy. Furthermore, the appropriation of a war situation in which Father André sacrifices his life for love for Madame Wu as well as his Chinese orphans is considered to be meaningless even though the war scene is technically dynamic and graphic. Rather, the appropriation of the war scene reveals to a large extent the filmmaker’s retrogressive vision. In selling a version of messianic white heroism in the character of the American missionary-doctor, the film *Pavilion of Women* has gone backwards to embrace old colonialism.

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