
In the Gaze of Loving Children: The Affects of Motherhood in Chang Tso-chi's *Thanatos, Drunk*

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates motherhood portrayed in Chang Tso-chi's films and how it is introjected or re-appropriated in the characters' empathetic identification and emotional tussles with their mothers. It delves into Chang's *Zui sheng meng si* (*Thanatos, Drunk*, 2015) to unpack the way in which class difference and gender norms are negotiated in the male characters' sentimental attachment to their mothers. Invoking Freudian sadomasochism in family drama and the transformative affect of shame in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reading of Sylvan Tomkins' theory, the article argues that *Thanatos, Drunk* delineates the contradictory social construct of motherhood and the children's re-inscription of their own otherness. The article argues that while the children's reflexive gaze at their mothers prompts the children's subject formation, Chang's film also visualizes a release from the essentialized position of motherhood for women.

KEYWORDS motherhood, shame, masochism, Chang Tso-chi, *Thanatos, Drunk*, subjectivity

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Introduction: The Interrogation into the Mainstream in Chang Tso-chi's Family Drama

A significant post-Taiwan New Cinema auteur, Chang Tso-chi (Zhang Zuoji) is often understood in Chinese film studies as a director engaged with the marginalized groups in contemporary Taiwan. Scholars tend to scrutinize the way Chang's works illustrate underclass characters' struggles against the effects of modernity. Specifically, Chang's signature styles of magical realism,¹ open-endedness, and black-outs are often discussed as a way to articulate resistance from the margins and to present multivalent realities that challenge mainstream values (H. Chen; Chuang). Nonetheless, little scholarship has been done on Chang's portrayal of mother-child relationship as a catalyst of subaltern subjectivity. In his films, conflicted mother-child relationships often foreground deep-seated gender and class inequalities, against which multiple layers of negotiations take place between the marginalized and the mainstream in the characters' struggle to survive, their subjectivity forged in the process.

To expand the approaches to Chang's works along this line, this article investigates the nuanced empathy the underclass children in his films show for their mothers and examines the various discourses that take shape in the mother-child dynamics. My reading is supported by Freud's conceptualization of sadomasochism, Judith Butler's theory of subject formation, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's affect theory. Through examining the pathos relayed from the "inadequate" mother to children who struggle for their viability in society, I examine the way Chang's 2015 *Zui sheng meng si* (*Thanatos, Drunk*) envisions a potential release from the narrative of sacrifice and victimhood surrounding women. The examination specifically contemplates the way in which the film underscores affect as a subversive power that challenges dominant ideologies. Focusing on the reflexivity implicit in the characters' struggles with maternal love, I argue that in *Thanatos, Drunk*, each male character is, physically or imaginatively, impelled to confront what will in time occasion their subjectification.

Chang Tso-chi's works often document the underprivileged in Taiwanese so-

¹ Film scholars have used various terms to characterize Chang's deployment of magical realism as a way to present alternative realities and to manifest the multilayered temporality and spatiality inhabited by the subaltern community. To shed light on the fantastic scenarios in Chang's works, Liao Chin-Feng uses the term "bright reality" (*guangming xianshi*), while Sing Song-Yong designates such a vision "poetic realism." Fei Lu calls Chang's works "another cinema," which combines the New Cinema's observational realism with a more personal and imaginative "psychological realism." Chris Berry elaborates upon Lu's observation and points out that since *Ah-Chung*, most of Chang's works present a "haunted reality," a term he proposes to describe the way Chang's films blur the boundary between the real and the fantastic.

ciety. After graduating from the Chinese Culture University in Taiwan in the eighties, Chang worked and learned his trade with several Hong Kong and Taiwanese directors such as Tsui Hark, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Yu Kan-ping, and Huang Yu-shan. Before making feature films, Chang had worked on documentaries and TV programs. His works at this stage, focused largely on troubled or delinquent youths in Taiwan, paved the way for the portrayal of the underclass in his later feature films.² Between 1996 and 2015,³ Chang directed eight feature films, all of which were screened at international festivals. In 2015, Chang was convicted of sexual assaults and went to prison. While serving his sentence, Chang directed a short film for the Agency of Corrections, *Xianshuiji de ziwei* (*True Emotion behind the Wall*),⁴ and won the best short film of the 2017 Taipei Film Festival.

Chang's ten feature films from 1996 to 2015 explore kinship in Taiwan. It is predominantly through the younger generation's perspective that his works delve into ambivalent, conflicted, or unconventional parent-child relationships and call attention to the social issues manifested through such relationships. Among these works, three feature films have sacrificing mothers as their central theme. They are *Zhong zai* (*Ah-Chung*, 1996), *Dang ai lai de shihou* (*When Love Comes*, 2010), and *Thanatos, Drunk*. Among them, *Thanatos, Drunk* presents the most complex and tortuous mother-son relationships.

Although suffering mothers do not always play a central role in Chang's works, their roles have become much more pronounced in his latest pieces. *Vis-à-vis* the bourgeois construct of motherhood, the presence of underclass mothers in Chang's recent works takes to task the contradictions within the construct. Relegated to the margins of society, these mothers quite often shoulder the financial burdens of the family. Their endurance of hardships and struggles in child-bearing

² In 1993, Chang made two episodes of the documentary series, *Liehuo qingchun shaonian dangan* (*Nomad Adolescent Files*) for Taiwan Television Enterprise. The two episodes are entitled "Theft" and "Gang Robbery." While following up on the teenagers in these two episodes, Chang learned about Guandu Wetland, the area where the teenagers frequented. Guandu Wetland inspired Chang for *Ah-Chung*, which uses the wetland as its setting.

³ Chang Tso-chi's debut feature film is technically *Anye qiangsheng* (*Midnight Revenge*, 1994), a film funded by a project called "Chinese Cinema from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan" (*liang'an sandi huaren dianying*). In an interview with Chris Berry, Chang explains his refusal to be credited as the director of the film. He dissociated himself from the film after the originally 123-minute long film was significantly edited into 67 minutes without his approval by the Hong Kong producer, Jacob Cheung Chi-Leung. The film was only released in Hong Kong and was never released in Taiwan (Cheng 159-61).

⁴ This latest work of Chang's continues the theme of a son's emotional attachment to his mother, only that such sentiments loom in the background of the storyline. Set in a prison cell, the short film portrays the emotional rapport of eight inmates who share the same cell. One of them, after a lengthy, silent rumination, finally reveals to his cellmates that he was informed by his own mother during a family visit that she was diagnosed with cancer and was unlikely to come back to visit him in the future, evoking lamentations among the inmates.

and child-rearing perpetuates their position as exploited labor. However, their resilience in surviving as protectors of their families sometimes undercuts the legitimacy of the patriarch and thus opens up an alternative space for new forms of agency.

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Sacrificing Mothers in Patriarchy and Onscreen

In patrilineal cultures, motherhood is often portrayed as sacred, its procreative function considered synonymous with the continuation of national and cultural lineage. Such sacredness is then bound up with the glorified duty to sacrifice oneself, both physically and emotionally, for the family. Feminist scholarship has pointed out that in male-dominated societies, women are often made to represent the purity and boundary of national traditions. Through discursive practices, idealized motherhood perpetuates the patriarchal control and regulation of women's body and agency. A boom in gender-and-nation studies since the mid-nineties, boasting leading female critics such as Sangeeta Ray, Anne McClintock, and Elleke Boehmer, foregrounds the way in which women in postcolonial geopolitical loci such as the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa are cast as a proxy of national traditions. In contemporary patriarchal societies shored up by bourgeois values, on the other hand, nurturing motherhood is often naturalized as women's intrinsic qualities (see Tobin; Rich). "The labor of love," so to speak, as part of the unpaid physical and emotional labor of care required of a nurturing mother puts enormous pressure on mothers of the modern family. While mothers tend to play the role of a much more emotionally engaged parent in understanding and adapting to their children's attitudes and lifestyles, they are also expected to raise children, particularly sons, to become successful and viable in a heteronormative, neoliberalist society (Brainer). As such, romanticization and essentialization of motherhood, shaped by discourses of neoliberalism and the patriarchal order, not only relegates women to domesticity but also curtails, if not denies, women's agency outside the domestic realm.

Since its invention, cinema has served as an imaginary space to disseminate the ideal of motherhood as a significant quality of womanhood. A groundbreaking theory of woman's cinematic representation, Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" discerns the discursive power of the male gaze. The male gaze embedded in narrative cinema's visual mechanisms, according to Mulvey, scrutinizes women's image from the patriarchal perspective, subjecting the woman on the screen to the scopophilic and sadistic control of the viewer who, following the camera eye, comes to occupy a masculinist position. Drawing on

Mulvey's theory, E. Ann Kaplan's work *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* contends that such an objectifying representation perpetuates the idealized motherhood that is nourishing, domestic, and self-sacrificing. In her 1992 book, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*, Kaplan notes that in American films, mothers on the screen are associated with "angels" that either assume the position of a sacrificing domestic laborer, or are dissociated from career or sexuality—a tendency symptomatic of masculinist anxiety about sexual liberation and about the increase of women in the workforce since the 1970s. Based on Kaplan's studies, Asma Sayed's essays in the collection *Screening Motherhood in Contemporary World Cinema* unpack the stereotypes of motherhood presented on the screen in various social and cultural contexts, including Canada, Eastern Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia to tease out the way the reinscription of maternal norms disrupts conservative and patriarchal discourses. Sarah Arnold's 2016 book, *Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood*, analyzes the maternal images in American horror films, including American adaptations of Japanese horror films. Deploying psychoanalysis and feminism as her interpretive methods, Arnold delves into the idealized image of "good mother" and that of the transgressive, evil, therefore punishable "bad mother" delineated in patriarchal culture and represented in horror films. Arguing that such maternal representations invoke both horror and pleasure, her study examines the cinematic discourses surrounding mother-child relationships and the maternal/pregnant body.

Comparable to the idealized image of motherhood in other cultures, devoted and self-sacrificing mothers in Chinese-language cinema also frequently appear as moral figures, who, despite harsh circumstances, uphold patrilineal values in bearing and rearing children. Quite often, women in these films are morally redeemed from their marginalized and stigmatized social positions by their committed and resilient maternal role. Films as early as from the silent era such as Wu Yonggang's *Shennü* (*The Goddess*, 1934), and works by Taiwan New Cinema directors such as *Xiaobi de gushi* (*Growing Up*, 1983) by Chen Kun-Hou, *Wo zheyang guo le yisheng* (*Kuei-mei, a Woman*, 1985) by Chang Yi, and *Kanhai de rizi* (*A Flower in the Raining Night*, 1983) by Wang Toon all tell stories of loving mothers enduring hardships for the sake of their children.⁵ These mothers suffer emotional and physical

⁵ Taking this point further, Yi-Kuan Huang delves into the way the cinematic representation of exploitation and oppression of the female body often subjects the female body to the male gaze. Huang cites several Taiwanese films adapted from *xiangtu* (native-soil) literature which feature prostitutes as protagonists to investigate the representation of sexualized female body within nativist narratives. She argues that in films which

distress that testifies to their moral character and unrelenting sense of responsibility. Like his New Cinema predecessors, Chang Tso-chi foregrounds women's struggles with the patriarchal and heteronormative order. But what distinguishes Chang's works from other filmmakers' is the configuration in which the child's gaze at the mother battling hardships generates affects that take to task cultural hegemonies. In Chang's films, it is also through the melancholic identification with the mother that the children articulate their own angst and discontents about contemporary Taiwan. Specifically, they are made acutely aware of their subalterity by their confrontation with shame and anger.

Tortuous Mother-Son Relationships in *Thanatos, Drunk*

In Chang's films, the gaze of the child that engages with the pathos of the underclass mothers disrupts the paternalistic gaze stipulating ideal motherhood. Such an empathetic engagement often finds its expression in the characters' interior monologues or emotional struggles. It is through the form of psychological drama⁶ that the characters in *Thanatos, Drunk* act out their angst and pathos triggered by their emotional attachment to their mothers. The portrayal of the characters' inner world in Chang's works thus manifests a subjective reality constituted not only by the external world but, more important, by the characters' perceptions, emotions, and the imaginary scenarios in which they react to their socio-economic circumstances.

Already in his first feature film, *Ah-Chung*, the child's gaze at the sacrificing mother articulates a disaffected young man's shame, sympathy, and powerlessness regarding an underclass woman's difficult conditions. Towards the end of *Ah-Chung*, the title character Ah-Chung watches his mother perform with an entertainment troupe on stage at a wedding banquet. The perspective shots cut be-

use the women's suffering as a trope of Taiwan's colonial history, her body is often objectified as visual pleasure in patriarchal terms. Even if the female character is redeemed by her suffering and sacrifice as a mother, she is deprived of subjectivity and relegated to a domesticated maternal role.

⁶ As a subgenre of psychological thrillers, psychological drama in the Hollywood tradition focuses on the characters' inner world. The protagonist is usually pitted against someone who challenges his or her conviction. Psychological contentions as such play out in genres such as courtroom dramas, film noir, and detective dramas. In its more extreme forms, psychological drama usually presents a world in which the character battles his/her insanity, delusion, or deep-seated inner conflicts caused by trauma or repressed memories. These struggles could also lead to physical destruction. Such mental struggles are sometimes externally expressed in film aesthetics (through *mise-en-scène* or cinematography). In *Thanatos, Drunk*, we see fantastic sequences, flashbacks, or emotional breakdowns of the characters when they are caught up in their torturous attachments to their mother.

tween Ah-Chung's pensive look and his mother's ludicrous performance as a pregnant woman with a farcical outfit boogieing next to another comedian who plays her husband. Together the two performers onstage rev up the banquet guests with their titillating jokes and movements, while Ah-Chung looks on offstage. At this point of the narrative, Ah-Chung's maternal grandfather, who had been living with his family, has just passed away. Ah-Chung's single mother, separated from Ah-Chung's alcoholic and abusive father, has been taking care of two sons and an aged father alone. This penultimate scene of a son's gaze expresses the silent pathos of a troubled underclass teenager for his self-sacrificing and wearied mother, whose scolding and nagging both taxes and guilts him, sending him to deeper confusion about his life. Ah-Chung's empathy for his mother, albeit often disguised in his contentious self-defense at her scolding, prompts him to confront his abusive father about the father's own sins. Later, in *Thanatos, Drunk*, the image, voice, and memory of dead mothers haunt the three young men living in the same apartment. They each live a life profoundly affected by their emotional ties with their mothers. Such a tortuous emotional attachment compels the characters to develop coping mechanisms that eventually lead to their subjectification.

Released in 2015, *Thanatos, Drunk* still features Chang Tso-chi's signature black-outs, open-endedness, and surrealism. Sentiments are sustained across different scenes by black-outs, with open-endedness suggested by scenarios where the characters are re-integrated into society. The turbulent emotional lives of a deviant group of men and women unfold in the ghostly presence of two mothers. On the one hand, there is Rat and Shanghe's alcoholic mother, whose self-indulgent lamentations, merrymaking, accusations, and criticisms intrude upon these tenants' lives as traumatic memories and triggers of conflicts. On the other, there is Shuo's mother, who died of cancer, but is said to live in the United States in Shuo's lie. Rat lives in a small apartment with Shuo and Shanghe. Shanghe is a gay brother who has just returned from the United States after a failed suicide attempt over the breakup with his partner. Shuo is a sought-after gigolo, who is dating Rat's cousin, Da-xiong, and whom Rat worships as a surrogate brother and a father figure. The characters move among three main settings: the three men's dingy apartment by the Xindian creek in Taipei; the narrow, winding alleys of a market where Rat works and spends time with his girlfriend, a young mute prostitute (The Mute); and Ximending, a renovated district in Taipei reigned by youth subculture, where Shanghe works by day in a film studio and dances by night at a gay club. The tension among these characters builds up along the lines of two revelations. First, their conversations gradually reveal the fact that Rat and Shanghe's alcoholic mother died of a fall in the apartment when both Rat and Shuo went away on a

trip to Kaohsiung. When Rat returned and discovered her in the apartment, her body had started to decompose, with maggots crawling all over it. Second, Shuo and Shanghe's covert flirtations culminate in a sex scene in the bathroom. The climax of the narrative is illustrated by two deadly confrontations: to save his girlfriend kidnapped by gangsters, Rat stabs the ringleader to death. In a confrontation with Shuo about his past involvements with other women, Da-xiong fatally wounds Shuo with a corkscrew. The film wraps up with surreal and euphoric scenes of Rat dancing with his sobered mother and Shuo and The Mute greeting Rat in the market as if nothing has happened.

Compared with *Ah-Chung*, the mother-child relationships in *Thanatos, Drunk* seem less reciprocal and more detrimental. The children bemoan their mothers' tragic life, yet they are also tormented by the memory of their mothers. In the film, whereas the absent mothers manifest themselves as victims exploited by the socio-cultural system or, more tragically, as cultural brokers that impose on her children the same conservative values that marginalize herself, the children are nonetheless compelled to seek their agency. While Rat's and Shanghe's relationships with their mother are verbalized in shaming and commiseration, Shuo's emotional attachment to his deceased mother delineates a lack he fetishizes to sustain his heterosexual gender performance. For these three characters, however, the affects of shame and melancholia turn into a condition in which their subjectivity is reconfigured.

Embodying both death and drunkenness, Shanghe and Rat's mother is a memory that creates tension among the three male characters. Her death as a result of the young men's neglect exposes the unspoken guilt and resentment they silently bear toward one another. The flashbacks show Shanghe and Rat's mother to be a performer of the nanguan opera in the past.⁷ She was abandoned by their father after he had an affair with another woman and went off with her to start a new family. In order to support herself and her two young sons, she became a hostess at a brothel. The mother's excessive drinking with clients at work continues after she returns home from work. As an abandoned woman in the dual sense of being jilted by her husband and of being a sex worker, Rat and Shanghe's mother embodies the double subjugation of women both in the private and the public domains. Exiled from the normative domestic space, she is relegated to the margins of society, her body continuing to be objectified and exploited in the capitalist culture.

⁷ Nanguan is a type of Chinese classical music of string instruments originated in the southern part of China, now considered a traditional local art in Taiwan.

As the spectral mothers haunt Rat, Shuo, and Shanghe, the diegesis gravitates around the characters' difficulties in recognizing and articulating the loss. More important, the haunting reveals the obscene, the unspeakable, and the abject excess of social mores. Viewed from Judith Butler's theory of subjectivity, the three male characters' attachment to their mothers bespeaks the primal trauma they have unconsciously incorporated into their egos in order to function in society. In the case of *Thanatos, Drunk*, what the grown children are forbidden to acknowledge is the exclusion of those who must be sacrificed to bolster mainstream society.

If the mother figure as an exploited victim can be traced both to the local patriarchal culture and to the global capitalist system, the characters' struggle with their sentimental attachment to their mothers can also be seen as foregrounding a complicit relationship between the local and the global in Taiwan. Hiding the fact about his mother's death, Shuo misleads others into believing that his mother works and lives in the United States, feigning a potentially affluent class status. To legitimize his sexuality, Shanghe chooses to leave home for the United States to reinvent himself as an elite. Rat is the only one who stays behind with their mother and, after her death, starts a relationship with an abused young mute prostitute. His empathy with social pariahs traps him in a similar marginal position.

To understand the complex emotional symbiosis between the mother and the child in Chang's films, the reflexivity implicit in Freud's theory serves as a productive interpretative method. In one of his early works on perversions, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud formulates a theory of sadomasochism founded on the Oedipal drama. Whereas Freud's discussion of the male child's development⁸ focuses on the father, quite a few scholars re-read Freud's theorization and shift the focus from the patriarchal authority to the comforting role of the mother in the economy of a child's sadomasochism. Rey Chow's reinterpretation of Freud's sadomasochism is one of such cases. Delving into the suffering and masochism associated with motherhood, Rey Chow views motherhood as a trope to understand the sentimentalism in modern Chinese literature, which often portrays individuals finding solace in identifying with the suffering of the self-sacrificing mother. Chow invokes Jean Laplanche's and Gilles Deleuze's explanations of the masochistic qualities attributed to the suffering mother in comparison with the classical Freudian definition. She notes that in discussing the idealization of

⁸ In Freud's discussion that focuses on boys' sexual development, not only does the paternalistic authority in the family forbid a male child's sexual desire for the mother, but it is also internalized as a self-disciplining drive when the male child imagines himself being beaten up by the father.

mothers, the two thinkers' reinterpretations of the Freudian sadism and masochism tease out the primacy of masochism over sadism and the reflexivity inherent in one's empathy for the self-sacrificing mother. In such a fantasy and internalization of the other's pain, one's subjectivity is constituted. In other words, to empathize with a suffering mother is to turn such an empathy upon oneself. According to Chow, the subjectivity is constituted and reinforced by a two-way dynamic: as one turns to the self-sacrificing mother like a child seeking love, one also gets to express understanding and sympathy for the mother who now is like a powerless infant. As Chow notes,

The mutual shifting of positionalities between "maternal" and "infantile" is what accounts for the fantasy involved in the idealization of the "mother," and for the pleasure-in-pain that is fundamental to masochism. Because it is enabled by suffering, the fusion with the mother cannot be imagined to be "pre-oedipal" but should be recognized as grounded in culture. (127)

That is to say, the fantasized responsiveness in a subject has been an affective structure integral to a culture which idealizes and thus morally demands unconditional sacrifices of the mother.

Chow's insight is useful in understanding the pathos expressed through the image of the mother in Chang's works. In *Thanatos, Drunk*, the characters are made acutely aware of their own social standing in their difficult relationships with their mothers. The maternal iconography saturated with affects becomes a site where social and cultural values can be interrogated. The mother's sacrifice for her children in dire conditions is eventually recast by her empathetic children as silent protest against social injustice.

Thanatos, Drunk features an intense variation on the motif of the empathetic yet strained mother-child relationship rendered in *Ah-Chung*, its melancholic tone set with prolonged and emotive close-ups of Rat's sentimental gaze. The film opens with long shots of Rat standing on the bank of the river punctuated by scenes of intimate yet contentious conversations between Rat and his inebriated mother. We see scenes of the drunken mother laughing with her mischievous son playing with matches and of them slow-dancing together. This poses a stark contrast to the distressful moments where Rat is shown sitting in the room with downcast eyes, tearing up after his mother measures him against his much more successful brother. These perplexing moments are then followed by a dream-like shot, in which Rat slowly walks up from the riverside and stops in front of the camera. The viewer is confronted with Rat's up-close gaze into the camera with tears streaming

down his face. Ambiguously, Rat's look seems at once to be pleading for love from his mother and addressing the viewer with his sentimentalism.

As the narrative develops, the sentimentalism is revealed to be bound up with the affect of shame. In their own ways, Shanghe, Shuo, and Rat all deal with rejection, conflicts, or lies in their relationship with their mothers. The manifestation of their psychic struggles recalls what Eve Sedgwick terms the "performativity" of shame. Sedgwick points out that shame is an intensive feeling which gives rise to self-awareness, specifically in one's marginalized position within society. Made aware of one's isolation and rejection from others, the subject who feels shame enacts a form of communication that is both alienating and connective. In Sedgwick's reading of Sylvan Tomkins' analysis, shame is an affect that is both personal and social. With its noticeable physical expressions (blushing; lowering of the head and the body; downcast eyes, etc.), the affect of shame is both introspective and performative. It turns the attention of the shamed subject to his or her very own self and existence, while at the same time relating such a self to the inspective and moralizing gaze of society. It is through the heightened sensitivity to the strained relation between self and other that transformation takes place. Such a transformation raises questions about individual and collective identity. In Sedgwick's words, shame

points and projects; shame turns itself skin side out; shame and pride, shame and dignity, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove. Shame, it might finally be said, transformational shame, is performance. . . . Shame is the affect that mantles the threshold between introversion and extroversion, between absorption and theatricality, between performativity and—performativity.⁹

Sedgwick considers shame an unsettling affect which opens up a space for revising norms. Within the moment where the subject of shame experiences disdain and rebuff, she/he is compelled to recognize and enunciate her/his subjectivity, no matter how problematic or denigrated it is. The confrontation with one's own otherness not just brings awareness to that otherness; it challenges the boundaries of social norms by causing physical reactions. In the moment of shame, one both withdraws and reaches out. The social interdiction of the shamed subject paradoxically demands address from society. In this sense, the three male characters perform their confrontation with society's discrimination. Each of them an outlier of

⁹ I consulted a Kindle edition of the book. See Locations 682-87.

society, they re-integrate, conform, and protest from their positions of shame.

Echoing Sedgwick's theory of shame in tandem with Chow's elaboration on the identification with the maternal suffering, the haunting presence of their mothers in the three characters' lives serves as a medium through which they wrestle with their otherness and re-insert themselves into a society that occasions such otherness. In this sense, the mother occupies a double position of shame: the one that is othered, and the one that indoctrinates the child with mainstream values. What transpires in *Thanatos, Drunk*, I argue, is how the three male characters confront and wrestle with their empathy with and rejection of such a position.

The unsettling nature of such a confrontation is foreshadowed in Rat's monologue. About eight and a half minutes into the film, Rat is shown to be sitting in his room, staring at an ant crawling around his fingers with amusement. In this sequence, Rat's own voice-over announces the return of his brother from the States: "My brother Shanghe came back three days ago. He lost his boyfriend in the States and came home. When I see him dancing around, the past seems like a knife, slowly stabbing me." The scene then dissolves into the aforementioned scene of Rat's tearing up in front of the camera. The manifold theatricality (Rat's obsession with the ant, Shanghe's dance, and Rat's sentimental gaze in the close-up) ushers in the transformative performance of shame in the story. As the three characters cope with their tortuous emotions toward their mothers, their subject formations bring to the fore issues of culture, gender, and class.

Mother as Interdiction and Fetish: Performance of Gender and Class in Shanghe and Shuo

For Shanghe and Shuo, the affect of shame is articulated through sexuality. Whereas Shanghe disavows his mother's anxiety about his homosexuality, Shuo commodifies his heterosexual performance and represses his homosexual desires. As such, their interest in each other underscores the discrepancy in class status and gender identity between them and manifests their respective standing within social norms.

The process in which Shanghe establishes his social viability has already taken place before his return to Taiwan, where he acts as an upbeat single gay man working in Ximending. As mentioned above, the reason for his return to Taiwan from the U.S. is only brought up in his brother Rat's monologue. Compared with Shuo and Rat, Shanghe's life is relatively in line with the mainstream culture. Throughout the film, Shanghe navigates his work and leisure activities with much more ease and has barely any involvement with the underworld both Shuo and Rat must

wrestle with. Speaking from the position of the elite, Shanghe sometimes acts as a moralizing older brother who criticizes Rat's dissipated life and expresses disappointment with his younger brother's transformation from an A student in high school to a self-destructive delinquent. It is not until halfway through the film that the viewer sees a heated altercation between Shanghe and his mother and gets a glimpse of Shanghe's struggle with his mother's reproof about his sexual orientation.

In the film, Shanghe is presented as an individual with agency and cultural capital. Having always done well in school, Shanghe is compelled to break away from the emotional throes of his mother as an intellectual who refuses to be bogged down by traditional heteronormative values. Having returned from the United States to begin a new life in Taiwan, Shanghe exemplifies what Ta-wei Chi (Dawei Ji) calls "quitting home to attain humanity" (*ba jia zuo ren*). In discussing the literary portrayal of homosexuality in Taiwan in the eighties, Chi points out that queer literary characters are no longer presented as sexually repressed. Since the late seventies, queer characters begin to draw sympathy from readers when they run into conflicts with their parents and eventually leave their family. These characters acquire agency via two socio-economic means. One, they gain recognition from the public by exhibiting commonality with all young readers: they experience clashes with their nuclear family, particularly their parents, just as every other coming-of-age young man or woman does. These characters' split with their family allows them to establish themselves as independent subjects through their narration, confession, and psychic struggles. Second, these characters often assert their legitimacy as subjects by amassing cultural and social capitals. In literary texts of the eighties, the queer characters become successful "human beings" when they quit their homes to go to the United States, either to pursue degrees or a career or to establish entrepreneurship. Here, in Chi's explanation, "human beings" connotes the hegemonic, privileged Western culture. Conforming to Western bourgeois humanism,¹⁰ these queer characters rise above the stigma of sexual aberration and transform themselves into an elite class (275-313). In addition, around the nineties, queerness was introduced to Taiwan as both a film genre (queer cinema) and an academic discourse, which then contributed to the growing activism

¹⁰ In his deployment of the term, Chi points out the conformism and the power hierarchy implied in the concept. Noting Abdul R. JanMohamed's elaboration on the way "humanism" denotes a specific set of values of the first world (only when conforming to such values would the third-world subject become legible and considered properly human), Chi uses the same logic to shed light on the relationship between homosexual and heterosexual characters in modern Taiwanese literature. In order for queer characters to be considered "human," they need to find a way to "recreate themselves" in accordance with mainstream values (288).

on the island. Although the development of gay and lesbian discourse in Taiwan since then has demonstrated interchange and translations between the global and the local, imported from the West, “queer” is still considered a terminology of the elite (see Liou; P. Chen).

It is the elitist position that Shanghe takes in response to his mother’s apprehension. Shanghe’s attempt to disabuse his mother of her fear about his homosexuality is manifest in a scene of argument. The confrontation is imbued with the mother’s guilt and shame, which is countered by the son’s indignant self-vindication. In this scene, Shanghe dismisses his mother’s incrimination of his sexuality and her guilt as a mother who gave birth to a gay son. Shanghe is first shown sitting in his room listening to his mother in another room berating him about his trip to the United States and his homosexual social circle. As the argument heats up, we see Shanghe standing in front of his mother, his back towards the camera. Their conversation becomes the son’s angry accusation of his mother’s toxic criticism:

Shanghe: Enough, Ma! Fuck! Stop worrying, will you? What is there to worry about? Why are you looking at me like that? Tell me! Because I’m gay? Because I like men? Is that it? . . . Don’t worry, Ma. Nobody blames you. I’m fine with it. People treat me well. I want to find a long-term partner.

Mother: I’m afraid that . . . you’ll be bullied, exploited, or mocked.

Shanghe: Ma, nobody will do that! Stop worrying! It’s all nonsense! You’ve always known I like men. Dad didn’t blame you for that. No one will look down on us. Ma, I’ll always be your son. Ma, please don’t be like this. I beg you, please don’t. I’ll always be your son. I’m your son.

As Shanghe rages over his mother’s incessant nagging and worry, we only see the distraught and confused look of the mother facing the camera. As the mother covers her face while she is overcome with emotions, her pathos denotes both sorrow and shame, which is then overpowered by Shanghe’s overbearing self-vindication. Yet, despite his escalated rage, Shanghe’s reassurance of his mother promises the maintenance of kinship (“I’ll always be your son”) and an exclusive sexual relationship (“I want to find a long-term partner”). Although Shanghe decides to leave his original family, the rebellious act is justified by a reiteration of conservative values of family and commitment. As Rat’s “successful” brother, Shanghe will be redeemed from his stigmatized gay identity by social mobility, although his return later will be viewed by his brother as a disturbing reminder of the tragic loss of their mother.

Empowered by a prestigious college degree, Shanghe leaves his mother and reinvents himself in the United States. After his return to Taiwan, he aspires for the life of an up-and-coming urban professional, gets a job at an art film studio, frequents gay bars, and socializes with foreigners. Moving around Taipei on a bicycle, Shanghe's open homosexuality represents a social privilege that is westernized, liberal, and hip. Shanghe as an embodiment of success is portrayed as a normative model for Shuo and Rat. Shanghe's urban gay identity attracts Shuo's attention as something to be studied and desired. After having sex with his girlfriend, Shuo peeks into Shanghe's room while the latter is working out half-naked. He then touches Shanghe's bike longingly on his way out. Later we also see him scrutinizing a poster of a gay film in Shanghe's room.

The different social meanings of Shanghe's and Shuo's homosexuality are manifested in the way they frequent Ximending. In a public space like Ximending, which emblemizes the crossings of the global and the local characterizing the history of Taiwan,¹¹ Shanghe and Shuo's queerness is marked by their social positions imbricated upon such crossings. While Shanghe works and parties there as a cultural practitioner and participant in a glamorous global gay culture, Shuo is a consumer and inquisitive spectator of Shanghe's leisure and social activities. Watching Shanghe dance in the club as a desirable, sexualized male body, courting and being courted by other club goers, Shuo goes to Ximending as a student of the Western queer culture introduced to him through the posters of international films on the walls of Shanghe's workplace. In another scene, humiliated by Da-xiong, who lashes out and slaps him in public after his flirtations with his male friends from high school at his own birthday party, Shuo is then left alone on the street of Ximending. At this moment, Ximending becomes a space in which Shuo simultaneously represses and explores his sexual desires, confusedly caught between his

¹¹ The setting of Ximending is itself a symbolic space that manifests the contentions between grassroots everyday practice and the investment of global capitals in the cultural industry. Now one of the most popular tourist spots and often nicknamed the Harajuku and Shibuya of Taipei, Ximending has gone through repeated renovations and revitalizations by the Japanese colonial government, the martial law Nationalist (KMT) government, and the post-martial law administrations of both KMT and DPP. The hub of underground gay culture, business, movie theaters, youth fashion, and restaurants, Ximending is a palimpsest written over and over again by various political and economic undertakings (Lee 123). Going through alternate periods of prosperity and obsolescence, Ximending was built by the Japanese colonial regime to mimic Japan's Asakusa, as a way to quell Japanese expats' homesickness and to glorify the superior colonial modernity. When the Nationalist Party took over Taiwan in 1945, Ximending's streets were renamed after cities in China, as a way for the government to reinforce its Sinocentric nationalism. The district was also constructed to reproduce the entertainment center of Shanghai, providing yet another nostalgic space for the Chinese immigrants. After martial law was lifted, successive administrations attempted to co-opt the youth subculture by turning Ximending into a theme park, and therefore "taming" the subversive activities of those who were once considered the delinquent youth and transforming it into a space for international tourists.

performance as a heterosexual object of desire for his clients and his girlfriend, and his own flow of desire legible only in Western epistemic import.

Compared with Shanghe, who breaks free from the emotional throes of the mother, Shuo copes with his gender identity and class inferiority with much less mobility. The enigma of Shuo's deceased mother thus figures as a sentimental fetish he carefully protects just as he carefully hides his homosexuality. In the film, Shuo and Rat constantly walk through a dark, narrow alley in order to go from home to work, which reflects their gloomy underclass conditions. As a closeted bisexual man, Shuo establishes relationships with women through his performance as a playboy in both his love life and his career. His gender identity is constructed as a commodity. Instead of flaunting his queerness as a social and cultural capital like Shanghe, Shuo needs to hide it in order to survive in the exploitative sexual market as an affective laborer. In this sense, his attachment to his mother is at once sentimental and expedient. Very little information about his mother is given in the narrative, except that she died of cancer years ago. Lying about his mother's death and telling everyone that his mother does business and resides in the United States and that he is also supporting her financially, Shuo turns his mother into a fetish for which he reserves his love and around which he performs his identity. The lie about his mother putatively links him to the superiority of the first world.

It is only in the intimate scene with Shanghe that Shuo barely begins to verbalize a desire to be freed from his gender performance. Throughout the film, Shuo operates in a sustained effort at maintaining his playboy/gigolo image until his pecuniary sexual relationships with women eventually become too strained, toxic, and fatal. In contrast to Shanghe's acquired mainstream subject position, Shuo's persona is constrained and fragile. His involvement with women only brutalizes and eventually kills him. When he breaks down in tears in front of Shanghe and confesses that he misses his dead mother, it is a moment when he suspends his performance as a ladies' man. In a fury, Shuo "breaks character" by tearing from the wall a large poster featuring his own air-brushed headshot. In Shuo's grim reality, the construction of subjectivity hardly begins with the rejection of his persona. In his confession to Shanghe, his nostalgia for the maternal love hardly translates into full-fledged subjectivity. The revelation of his mother's death (a secret divulged to Da-xiong by one of Shuo's clients), which coincides with the revelation of his sexual orientation, is soon followed by a fatal confrontation with Da-xiong. In other words, the coming out of Shuo forebodes his destruction, rather than his liberation.

Re-inscribing Maternal Love: The Immobility and Intransigence of Rat

Among the three characters, Rat is shown to be most intimately engaged with his mother. The film opens with his bantering and arguments with his mother in flashbacks and ends with him reconciling with her in a surrealist vision. In a way, his subjectivity is constituted in his determination to rescue the abject. Such a devotion to being part and the protector of the downtrodden eventually pushes him to seek liberation from his mother's emotional manipulation, leading to a transformation of their relationship. The film title, *Thanatos, Drunk*, which spells out his mother's abject state of death and paralysis, not only most befittingly characterizes Rat's self-imposed immobilization, but also delineates the very state of powerlessness that he desperately tries to turn around.

If Shuo demonstrates a failed attempt at elevating his social status through gender performance, Rat epitomizes an adamant reluctance to surrender his primal love/loss and a melancholic immobility that protests mainstream values. Whereas Shuo participates in sexual transactions and gender masquerade with a certain degree of financial viability, Rat's errant and aimless life pronounces a refusal to abandon the sacrificed and the outlawed. He surrounds himself with the dead and the outcast by constantly speaking to and playing with mice, ants, maggots, and tilapias. His persistence in identifying with his mother's marginality is also expressed in his antisocial behavior. He squanders his menial income on *The Mute*, steals a dashcam only to film and speak to an ant and a maggot, and kills a ring-leader who batters and threatens Shuo and *The Mute*. He wanders around the riverbank, Shuo's and Shanghe's bedrooms, the alleys in the market, and anonymous and claustrophobic rooms where his girlfriend performs sexual transactions with her clients. His movement conveys a sense of repetition, dissipation, as well as a persistent search for emotional connection. Unlike Shanghe, who refuses to inherit the emotional burden from his mother, and unlike Shuo, who consecrates his love for his mother by treating other women as mere clients, Rat attempts to salvage the loss by protecting and rescuing the abject. In the film, we see Rat frequently parade a pig's head he gets from a meat vendor. Whereas Rat compares Shuo to the pig's head for being a handsome and slick ladies' man, the grotesque yet uncannily human-like grin of the pig's head also reflects Rat's own liminal social position. In this sense, the eerie grin spells out Rat's poignant cynicism and resilient interrogation of society.

Rat's empathy for the abandoned is expressed in his bonding with his cousin Da-xiong and his love interest *The Mute*. Both women are short-changed in the heteronormative economy. Eager to form a family with Shuo, Da-xiong finds herself caught in a dilemma. She provides for Shuo, hoping to introduce him to her

parents and eventually start a family with him. While she buys her way into the relationship with Shuo, she has indeed become one of his clients to whom he begrudges his loyalty. Da-xiong drinks absinthe, snorts drugs, and jeers with Rat after she sees her boyfriend flirt with other men. In their playful mutual commiseration, they both strangely admit that Shanghe is their shared sexual fantasy. Their playful Shanghe-worship inadvertently reveals their recognition of Shanghe's superior social position and their own doomed choice of love. Whereas Shuo's ascension on the social ladder re-appropriates his sexual deviancy, Rat's and Da-xiong's subaltern status (his defined by his economic inferiority and hers by her gender) defines them as failure under mainstream values.

On the other hand, Rat's courtship of The Mute allows him to form a relationship he was unable to have with his mother. Shunned by the vendors in the market, The Mute is subject to violence and can only seek temporary protection from Rat's vigilantism. Rat's unconditional devotion to The Mute appears to be a repentant act to compensate for his inability to protect his own mother from her accidental death. In a scene in which Rat brings The Mute into his apartment, they dance together, the slow, intimate movements reminiscent of Rat's dance with his mother. Here, Rat recasts the strained mother-son relationship into one between two social outcasts consoled by each other's company. If Rat's baneful relationship with his mother turns out to be a traumatic memory (in that it is a memory full of anger and guilt), after the mother's death, his dedication to The Mute then becomes a repetition and revision of the very trauma.

The revision of trauma is completed in an illusory scenario where Rat reunites with his mother. After he kills the ringleader, he sinks into a state of disorientation in which he re-encounters the death scene of his mother, and unexpectedly enters a fantasy of her coming back to life. In a surrealist scene where the present (when he stumbles home from the murder scene) and the past (when he came home to discover his mother's dead body) blend into each other, Rat's confused and tormented mental state reaches a turning point where he envisions a different ending to his mother's life. We see Rat walk slowly out of the apartment and gently release an ant crawling around his neck. Following his gaze, we see his mother standing by the riverbank, looking back at her son. After Rat releases a tilapia he has kept in his fish tank, the mother empties a wine bottle. They start a slow dance together in front of the evening skyline of Taipei. The reconciliation with his mother is not just Rat's wish fulfillment. More important, the sobered mother who now embraces her son in peace is also a woman released from her position of social subjugation and abjection.

Conclusion: Redemption in Maternal Love

In *Thanatos, Drunk*, the trauma of loss, stemming from the unrecognized and un-grieved victimization of the disenfranchised, i.e., the mother, becomes the precondition of the men's development into (dys)functional social beings. Notably, the underside of the three men's subject performance is the liminal condition of women. Embodying different meanings of *abandonment* (*abandoned* as "degenerate," "degraded," or "deserted"), these women are relegated to a precarious position. While *The Mute* is silenced, shunned, and brutalized, Da-xiong's futile attempt in forming a normative family rehearses the narrative of a jilted mother.

Originally entitled *Love Is Blue, Thanatos, Drunk* articulates the unresolved mother complex embodied by a failed and shaming mother. Such is a complex constituted by the double-edged discourse around motherhood. In the film, the color blue is associated with the female characters, from the blue dress of Shanghe and Rat's mother, to Da-xiong's blue hair dye, to the blue sweater Rat purchases for *The Mute*. The metonymical relationship among these women also indicates the transference of the characters' ambivalent sentiments for their mothers. The transference of the pathos from one female character to another not only underscores the shared social circumstances of these women, but also perpetuates the victimhood assigned to them.

True to form, Chang's magical realism takes on a dialectic trajectory. A surrealist vision at the end of the film projects a parallel narrative to the deceased mothers' tragedy. The psychological drama evolves into an aspiration for a release: a release from victimhood and shame, from the state of dependency and marginality. This is accomplished by the way the tenderness of the slow dance between Rat and *The Mute* unfolds into a scenario of reconciliation in Rat's vision of his mother's return. In this scene, the sobered mother regains her subjectivity and is liberated from the throes of the exploitive and subjugating motherhood and victimhood.

Moreover, the vision holds out not so much an intent to be co-opted into social norms as a desire for the outcasts to re-insert themselves as subjects with agency. This is manifest in the open-ended final sequence in the market. As usual, Rat performs his odd job, wanders in the market, and banter with the vendors. He runs into Shuo and *The Mute* and has brief conversations with them. As Shuo bids him goodbye, Rat turns around and finds *The Mute* gone. The camera then breaks away from Rat and follows Shuo. As Shuo walks through the dark alley, the camera follows his point of view and zooms in on a lit florescent tube above before he walks out of the darkness at the other end. Earlier in the film, Rat passes by the same light in the same spot. Here the repetition of the scene breaks away

from Rat's sentimentalism and re-opens a possibility that is yet to be articulated.

Critics have noticed the subversive power in Chang's fantastic rendering of the grim and desperate life of the underclass. The surrealist elements in his restrained, minimalist story-telling often bring about a dramatic tension that reveals a persistent epistemic negotiation of the underprivileged with the hegemony. The psychological realism (Lu), or "haunted reality" (Berry), is not merely a symptom of Taiwan's multilayered colonial past (direct political and military control by foreign regimes) and its neocolonialist present (Taiwan's complicit engagement with global economy). The fantastic visions derived from it hold out a different world order in which the marginalized and the disenfranchised humanize themselves by articulating their wishes and re-claiming their rights to live in freedom and dignity. In foregrounding the characters' subjective sense perceptions and psychic reality through open-endedness and surrealism, *Thanatos, Drunk* reveals the vulnerability of the underclass at the mercy of discriminative state policies and global economy while expressing a refusal to be locked in the narrative of victimhood and presenting a cyclic vision of life after death. As such, the fantastic visions portray a utopian alternative and generate a sense of empowerment.

In the very scenario of Shuo's and The Mute's parting with Rat, what seems like a reiteration of the characters' quotidian life manifests a subtle transformation in Rat's relationship with the two brutalized characters. In this scenario, Shuo and The Mute walk away from Rat in the market to carry on with their life without needing Rat's comfort and rescue. Whereas Rat kills the ringleader for the sake of both Shuo and The Mute, their symbolic parting with Rat's protection implies a release of the victimized from Rat's empathetic gaze.

Nonetheless, if the end of the film, like Chang's other works, visualizes a liberation of the marginalized from systematic oppression, the fact that Chang Tso-chi was sentenced to jail soon after *Thanatos, Drunk* was first screened in the Berlin International Film Festival complicates the theme of motherhood and throws up an unsettling irony. While the film garnered awards at both international and domestic festivals, Chang's absence in most of them removes him from the film's success. Such a removal takes on an afterlife when he directs his next work, *True Emotion behind the Wall*, a 38-minute short that won the Best Short in the 2017 Taipei Film Festival. Almost as an absolution, in the short film, a felon son, Long-Xian, who is sentenced to life imprisonment, expresses his indebtedness to his mother. By the moral support of his fellow inmates, he re-inserts himself into society as a reformed individual. In the film, the mother still has a spectral presence in Long-Xian's inhibited yet deep affection for her. Long-Xian's sorrows and regrets for his aged mother recently diagnosed with liver cancer also reveal his loneliness and remorse in incarceration.

With Chang Tso-chi's scandal looming large in the background, the anguish at failing and forsaking one's mother expressed in the narration of another prison inmate, Se-Han, somehow supplants the potential liberation of the characters from their victimhood in *Thanatos, Drunk*. While Chang expresses his guilt towards his own mother in an interview about the film (K. Chang), his own voice of repentance and self-defense becomes a metanarrative that seeps into *True Emotions behind the Wall* and, retroactively, *Thanatos, Drunk*. In the interview conducted a week before his prison sentence, Chang pleads not guilty and talks about his desire to run away from his worrying mother. The interview appears to be a mixture of an apologia for his personal life and a confession about his filial responsibility for his mother. Compared with the liberation from the masochistic dynamics that constitutes the social discourse behind the mother-child relationships in *Thanatos, Drunk*, *True Emotions behind the Wall* reverts determinedly to the son's indebtedness to his nurturing mother. The gaze of the loving son, in this case, returns to himself as one that needs to be interpellated by social norms. In this return, the mother is once again relegated to an essentialized position of emotional consolation and unconditional sacrifice that serves to validate a male adult's moral standing.

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