

## **FAMILY RELATIONS IN MAINLAND CHINESE MELODRAMA FILMS: A CASE STUDY OF THE FILM *A DOG BARKING AT THE MOON***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores how cinematic techniques and narrative structures reflect social norms by analysing the Chinese melodrama *A Dog Barking at the Moon*. Using a semiotic and cultural framework, it examines how *mise-en-scène* elements—such as lighting, props, and spatial arrangements—convey themes of parental authority, intergenerational conflict, and the tension between tradition and modernity. Drawing on Roland Barthes's mythologies and Foucauldian discourse, the study reveals how visual symbols construct latent meanings and highlight the fluid dynamics of power within family relationships. While previous feminist studies focus on patriarchy and male privilege within the family, they often overlook the dynamic power relations shaped by familial interactions and the film's implicit reconstruction of familial mythology. This study provides a more nuanced critique of power, discourse, and representation in contemporary Chinese melodrama. The mother, constrained by societal normative discourse, functions as a proxy of governmental power, regulating and influencing other family members. Her central positioning within various cinematic scenes exemplifies this role. In contrast, the father's silence and absence symbolize the marginalization and suppression of non-heteronormative identities under heteronormative expectations, visually reinforced through his exclusion from key family interactions. The findings reveal how the film, as a melodrama, both reinforces and challenges Confucian familial ideals, offering a layered critique of evolving social expectations.

**Keywords:** Chinese melodrama, *mise-en-scène*, cinematic techniques, family dynamics.

## Introduction

*A Dog Barking at the Moon* (2019), directed by Xiangzi, is the first feature film from mainland China to explore the issue of *tongqi*—women in heterosexual marriages with gay men—and received the Teddy Award at the Berlin International Film Festival. Although the *tongqi* narrative was shaped by second-hand accounts, Xiangzi (2019) has emphasized that the portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship reflects her own lived experience. As a result, the film's thematic focus gradually shifts from marital concealment to intergenerational estrangement, blending intimate emotional inquiry with a carefully constructed visual aesthetic. The film's portrayal of both the *tongqi* issue and the mother-daughter relationship prompts a reflection on how patriarchy reshapes gender and generational dynamics in contemporary Chinese families. Overall, while China's family structure has evolved alongside modernization and industrialization, the family remains a central social unit. Discourses shaped by Confucian frameworks continue to regulate individual roles within the household (Chodorow, 1978). One core element of Chinese patriarchy is the designation of men as sole inheritors, which systematically excludes women from power structures (Baker, 1979). Confucian concepts such as *filial piety* and *face* further reinforce patriarchal authority (Santos & Harrell, 2017). Thus, despite legal frameworks promoting gender equality, son preference persists in various forms. Moreover, contemporary Chinese patriarchy reflects a hybrid structure—shaped both by traditional norms and modern discourses influenced by Western science and shifting social conditions.

This study situates *A Dog Barking at the Moon* within the context of hybrid patriarchy in contemporary China, re-examining intrafamilial relations with a focus on power imbalance and its operation. By foregrounding familial conflict, the film employs recurring visual motifs—such as lighting, composition, and props—as tools of *mise-en-scène* to represent the tensions between family members. Drawing on Roland Barthes's semiotics, this paper analyzes how these visual elements construct and mediate relational dynamics within the patriarchal family structure. Family conflict, central to domestic melodrama, often reflects both emotional strain and the reproduction of gendered power dynamics (Han, 2011). While *A Dog Barking at the Moon* critiques patriarchy, its focus on intergenerational tensions and ethical confrontations aligns more with melodramatic conventions than feminist cinema, though it still invites feminist readings of familial power.

Melodrama invites audiences to reflect on social norms and family dynamics, while mythic narratives function as cultural mediators that facilitate both adaptation to and resistance against dominant ideologies (Lozano & Singhal, 1993). This study first draws on Roland Barthes's mythologies to examine how *A Dog Barking at the Moon* uses *mise-en-scène* to visualize family conflict. It then employs Foucauldian theory to analyse the family space as a site of power, where individuals are shaped into distinct subjectivities through mechanisms of governmentality. This study argues that *A Dog Barking at the Moon* presents familial dynamics that move beyond the typical abuser–victim binary. After discovering her husband's homosexuality, the mother, Jiumei, stays in the marriage but redirects her frustration toward their daughter, Xiaoyu, whose gender and sympathy for the father intensify their conflict.

Interpreting the mother and daughter solely as victims, or the father's absence merely as a threat to patriarchy, neglects his marginalization due to gender nonconformity. The film reveals how shifting power relations both reconstruct and challenge patriarchal authority.

This study employs semiotic analysis and cultural critique to address a gap in the existing literature regarding how Chinese family melodramas engage in deconstructing familial myths. Based on the findings, the research aims to address the following questions:

1. How does the film's *mise-en-scène* convey character conflict and metaphorically represent family relationships through visual elements such as composition, props, and setting?
2. How does the film challenge the family power structure, and what counter-myth does it construct through this challenge?

### **A review of Chinese melodrama and familial relations**

As a cinematic genre, melodrama—particularly domestic melodrama—often centers on tensions within middle-class families. Scholarly research in this area has examined the interplay between melodramatic form, narrative structure, and mythic representation. As a narrative mode, Chinese melodrama is both formally structured and flexible, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between family and society. It reaffirms social values while offering critical insight into patriarchal structures and tensions between tradition and modernity (Lozano & Singhal, 1993). Often expressed through domestic narratives, Chinese melodramas focus on generational conflict, marital crisis, and personal sacrifice, positioning the family as a microcosm of social order (Ma, 1993; Langda, 2007). These films highlight themes of filial piety, gender roles, and national identity, reflecting Confucian ethics while responding to the modernization of state discourse.

Historically, melodrama in China has carried strong mythic qualities. During the Cultural Revolution, it functioned as a tool of political propaganda; in the post-socialist era, it conveys more symbolic and indirect critiques of state ideology. As Hoggart (1977) and Lévi-Strauss (1972) argue, myth operates through symbolic structures and repetitive narratives that construct collective identity. In Chinese melodrama, this mythic dimension appears in character types, family structures, and recurring ethical dilemmas—especially the motif of sacrifice. Brown (1994) notes that melodrama in the Chinese context mediates between the individual and the state, ethics and politics, reflecting the tensions of subjectivity in the modernization process.

As a key tool for analyzing melodrama, semiotics reveals how visual symbolism contributes to the construction and transformation of ideology across historical periods. In early revolutionary cinema, female figures, such as the "woman warrior," symbolized the pure revolutionary spirit (L. Li, 2010). Since the 1980s, these symbolic systems have shifted—for instance, *Hibiscus Town* subverts revolutionary myth through exilic imagery and narrative inversion (Zeng, 2012). More recent urban melodramas blend personal nostalgia with national history, producing intimate yet political family narratives (S. Liu, 2019). These studies

demonstrate that Chinese melodrama articulates familial structures not through linear plots but through spatial composition, color metaphor, and silence—visual strategies that both reinforce and challenge patriarchal order.

While existing scholarship has explored the social function and mythic dimension of melodrama, most studies focus on narrative structure and ideological meaning, leaving the visual representation of intra-family power dynamics underexamined. For instance, Ma Ning draws on Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence to show how 1980s family dramas reinforced patriarchal norms yet offers limited analysis of audiovisual language. Similarly, Han Qijun's (2015) comparison of Chinese and American family dramas highlights narrative differences but overlooks how Chinese cinema visually constructs familial hierarchy and power relations.

### **Studies on the absence of the father in melodramatic cinema**

*A Dog Barking at the Moon* continues the familial themes of Chinese melodrama, focusing on conflicts sparked by the father's homosexuality and the reshaping of family power under gendered and moral tensions (Han, 2015). Avoiding direct depictions of homosexuality, the film uses a nonlinear structure to explore complex intergenerational dynamics, offering a feminist critique of patriarchy (Zhang, 2021; Hou, n.d.). While previous studies emphasize queer coming-out narratives, director Xiangzi highlights the film's roots in a mother–daughter relationship (Xiang, n.d.). The father's symbolic absence reflects the erosion of patriarchal authority—a strategy seen in Hong Kong and Latin American cinema, where paternal absence often critiques state or colonial power (Shaw, 2004; Li, 2017). These studies suggest that the absent father functions not only as a narrative catalyst but also as a symbolic critique of patriarchy and gendered power.

*A Dog Barking at the Moon* stands out for its depoliticized focus on familial power and the ambivalence of maternal authority, framing the household as a microcosm of broader power shifts. This study argues that the film not only questions patriarchy but also reveals how power is reproduced—especially through the father's absence, which reinforces rather than threatens patriarchal norms. Drawing on Foucault's theory of power as diffuse and embedded in spatial and relational structures (Foucault, 1978), the analysis focuses on how domestic space becomes a site of emotional control and discipline. By examining *mise-en-scène*, narrative rhythm, and visual composition, this study provides a critical perspective on Chinese melodrama that transcends macro-ideological readings.

### **Methodology**

This study conducts a poststructuralist analysis of *A Dog Barking at the Moon*, drawing on two main methodological approaches. First, it examines the film's *mise-en-scène*—lighting, composition, and spatial arrangements—through Roland Barthes' mythological framework, exploring how visual symbols and character dynamics construct and deconstruct myth. Second, it offers a cultural analysis of the film's power relations, focusing on how the roles of the mother and father reflect and challenge contemporary patriarchy, and how the film negotiates myth and counter-myth at the ideological level.

Roland Barthes (1972) proposes that sign systems have two levels: a literal first-order meaning and a second-order myth, which attaches cultural and ideological significance. Film, as a system of signs, not only tells stories but constructs myths that naturalize ideology (Barthes, 1972, pp. 59, 113–114). Visual elements such as composition, sound, and dialogue serve as tools of ideological expression (Polan, 1981). While Barthes encourages active, multi-layered interpretation to resist myth, he warns that even resistance can be absorbed, necessitating the creation of counter-myths (Barthes, 1972, p. 62). *A Dog Barking at the Moon* uses mise-en-scène to reveal gender and power tensions, visually challenging patriarchal myths.

This study applies Foucault’s concept of power as a network shaped by discourse and knowledge (Foucault, 1978, 1980) to examine family dynamics in *A Dog Barking at the Moon*. The film’s portrayal of the father’s homosexuality highlights how norms are discursively constructed. Drawing on Taylor (2012) and Oyeleye (2020), the analysis shows how visual storytelling reflects broader ideological and gendered power structures.

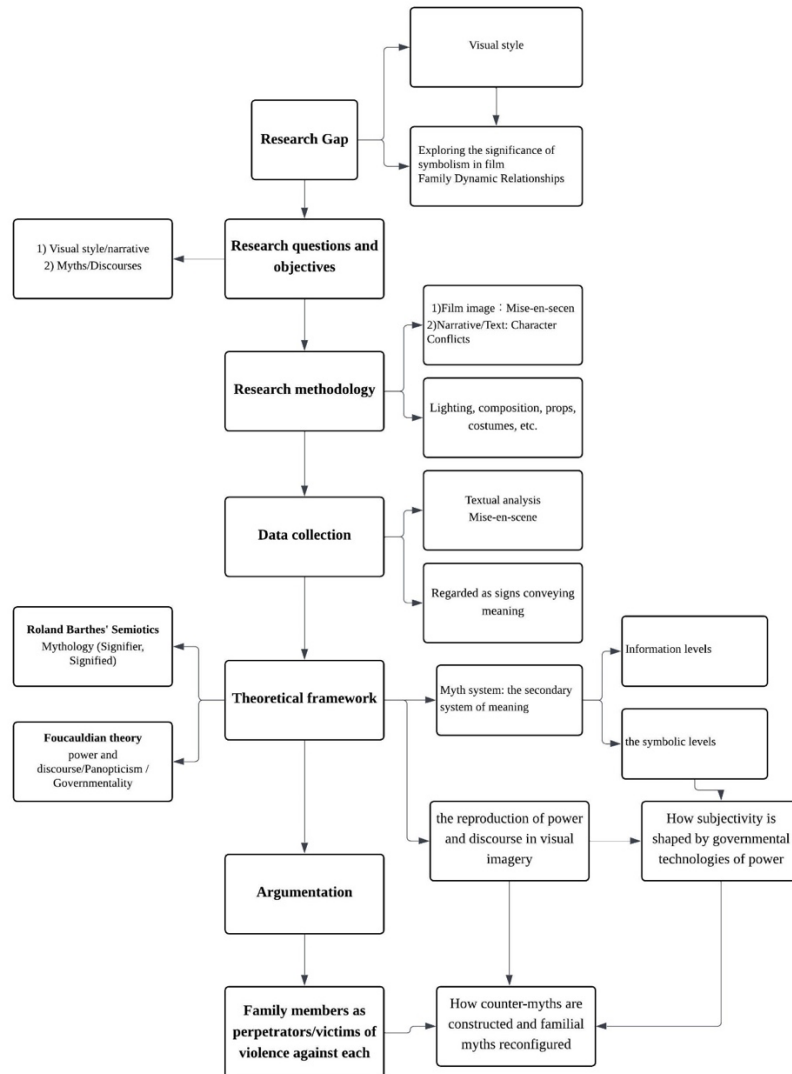


Figure1: Research Design

Based on Figure 1, this study will primarily focus on how cinematic images function as a visual narrative strategy to depict familial relationships. The *mise-en-scène* of the film—including elements such as lighting, composition, costumes, and props—will be treated as a key theme of analysis, with a particular emphasis on the narrative of interpersonal conflicts. Initially, these elements will be analyzed on the informational level, corresponding to Barthes's concept of 'denotation' within semiotics. Subsequently, the symbolic or connotative dimensions of the *mise-en-scène* will also be examined. In this analysis, the study will further explore the resistant discourses conveyed by the film, which constitute a 'counter-myth' within Barthes's secondary system of meaning. The analysis of this secondary signification system adopts a tripartite framework—visuality, discursivity, and power—drawing on Foucault's concepts of: (1) the circulation and reproduction of power through discourse, and (2) panopticons as a mechanism of surveillance and subject formation.

This study aims to integrate Barthes' semiotics with Foucault's theory of power to examine the visual representation and ideological construction of family in *A Dog Barking at the Moon*. Their frameworks complement each other in analysing the interplay of image, discourse, and power. Barthes's semiotics is particularly concerned with how visual signs convey 'second-order meanings'—that is, *myths*—which serve to naturalize social ideologies and construct a seemingly self-evident social order within cultural texts. Foucault, by contrast, emphasizes that power is not a centralized or repressive force, but rather operates through everyday discursive practices and disciplinary mechanisms, thereby permeating social life and reproducing norms and structures of so-called 'normality.'

### **Visuality and Panopticism:**

The film's *mise-en-scène*—its visual composition, lighting, and spatial arrangement—functions not only narratively but as a regime of visibility. The mother is often positioned centrally or elevated, while the father appears obscured or absent, reflecting Foucault's notion of panopticism: a subtle yet persistent mechanism of surveillance (*Discipline and Punish*). Within the domestic space, the mother embodies both observer and observed, disciplining other family members, particularly through control over the daughter's behaviour and emotions. Thus, the household becomes a site of visual power.

### **Discursivity and the Reproduction of Power:**

Beyond the visual, this study examines how dialogue and recurring cultural symbols (e.g., calligraphy) enact discursive power. For Foucault, power is not repressive but circulates through discourse, becoming internalized and reproduced. The mother's insistence on a "normal" family, her denial of the father's sexuality, and her moral judgments reflect how everyday language reinforces and sustains familial authority.

This study selects *A Dog Barking at the Moon* as a case study due to its focus on intra-family conflict, nonlinear multi-perspective narrative, and highly symbolic visual style. Through

elements such as lighting, composition, and costume, the film reflects Chinese familial ethics and social values, offering rich material for analyzing myth-making and ideological critique within family melodrama. The analysis centers on key visual motifs and conflict scenes—such as the mother’s centrality, the father’s absence, and the daughter’s shifting temporal identity—which carry strong semiotic value and reveal non-narrative cultural metaphors. Particular attention is also given to two banquet scenes, which expose hierarchies and power dynamics within the family. Adopting a textual analysis approach, the study closely examines *mise-en-scène* and its symbolic functions across three narrative stages: Jiumei’s youth, Xiaoyu’s adolescence, and Xiaoyu’s adulthood. This includes scene-by-scene analysis of lighting, framing, and color to unpack visual metaphors and interpersonal dynamics.

The research proceeds through: (a) scene categorization and annotation of power symbols; (b) frame-by-frame analysis of domestic settings, emphasizing traditional cultural symbols; and (c) discourse and narrative analysis to explore how language and structure represent power and conflict. Theoretically, the study integrates Barthes’ mythologies and Foucault’s discourse-power framework to analyze how the film’s visual language constructs familial governance, subjectivity, and counter-myths. Ultimately, the research reveals how the film critiques and reconstructs gender, generational, and cultural power structures within the Chinese family.

This study focuses on *A Dog Barking at the Moon* as a single case, acknowledging its limited representativeness. To reduce this constraint, relevant literature is used to contextualize similar works. As a method, textual analysis is inherently subjective, shaped by the researcher’s perspective and constrained by the absence of firsthand materials. Audience reception is not considered, leaving the film’s broader cultural impact unexplored. Despite these limits, textual analysis enables a close reading of how the film encodes familial power and ideology. Combining Barthes’ semiotics and Foucault’s discourse–power theory, the study examines *mise-en-scène*—lighting, composition, costume, color, and sound—to reveal how visual elements construct critiques of patriarchy and heteronormativity. Barthes’ theory explains the film’s counter-myths, while Foucault’s concepts trace how domestic space enacts disciplinary power. Together, these frameworks offer a critical lens on the film’s gender and ideological structures.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **The relationship between familial representation and power dynamics in the film**

Directed by Xiang Zi, the 2019 film *A Dog Barking at the Moon* explores the internal tensions of a Chinese middle-class family during a time of social transformation. Using a nonlinear narrative, the film highlights two core conflicts—gender dynamics and intergenerational rupture—embedded in everyday familial interactions.

The plot centers on the father’s hidden homosexuality, which destabilizes the family structure. The mother, Juimei, gains authority yet remains shaped by patriarchal values, while the daughter, Xiaoyu, resists both religious and maternal control, signaling a generational


divide. The mother’s turn to religious devotion further fragments the family, revealing the tension between personal desire and collective moral expectations.

Through stylized visual composition, the film depicts the family as a site for reproducing patriarchal power in subtle, modern forms. Its melodramatic structure becomes a critical lens to examine the intersections of family, ideology, and gendered authority in contemporary China.


**The Mother’s Central Role in the Family: The Internalized Maternal Figure**

The mother’s central placement in the film’s visual composition functions as a recurring visual metaphor. These images not only underscore the dramatic tensions within familial relationships but also highlight how Jiumei embodies both domestic authority and internalized familial discourse. From a Foucauldian perspective, the mother operates as both an agent of power and a subject of surveillance (see Table 2)

**Table 2: *Mise-en-Scène* Analysis of Selected Scenes from *A Dog Barking at the Moon* (A fixed Shot of the Dining Table Scenes)**

		
	<b>Denotation</b>	<b>Connotation</b>
Compositi on	This shot creates a symmetrical composition, with the mother positioned at the center of the dining table and others placed on either side, forming a central axis around her.	The mother’s significant position within the family is emphasized. She has assumed the father’s role and exercises his authority, implying his absence. The symmetrical and centered composition suggests the stability of the family order.
Lighting	The lighting illuminates the mother's face, making her features more distinct, while the	The mother assumes the role of maintaining the family's 'face'



	faces of the other individuals remain less clear.	and preserving an outward appearance of tranquility.
Color	The overall color tone is predominantly dark and cool, but the light source is warm-toned.	This illustrates a brief moment of warmth within the family. Unlike in second figure, the cool tones here underscore the emotional detachment of the present moment.
		
	<b>Denotation</b>	<b>Connotation</b>
Composition	The mother sits between the two families, arranged in a mirror-image composition.	This implies that both families share similar experiences and conflicts. However, the mother holds decision-making power within both families.
Composition	The overall tone of the shot is predominantly yellow.	This suggests the scene represents a recollection or flashback.
Props	A Chinese painting, <i>Zhaoyebai</i> , is positioned directly above. In the painting, the horse is tethered to a black wooden stake (as shown in the figure).	This symbolically reflects the current state of each family member. Each character, like the tethered horse, is portrayed as having lost their freedom.



**Figure 4.1:** A Close-up of *Zhaoyebai* in the Scene

Figure 4.1 is a close-up detail of the Chinese painting *Zhaoyebai*. A white horse is tethered to a black wooden stake, symbolizing the tense relationships among the characters within the family. It also suggests the mother's entrapment within the family structure.

The mother's central position within the cinematic frame highlights her significance within the family. As the key decision-maker, she appears to invert the traditional patriarchal structure, where authority is typically attributed to the male figure (Foucault, 2022, p. 85). However, this apparent dominance is achieved at the cost of the father's absence. Her centrality thus symbolizes not only visible authority but also her confinement within the boundaries of domesticity.


In Image 2, the father remains visibly present, while in Image 1, he has completely disappeared from the family space. Both scenes underscore the family's emphasis on the mother's role as a woman, highlighting that her limited authority is attainable only within the domestic sphere. In contrast, the father's departure suggests a temporary release from familial constraints. These scenes illustrate that the continuation of the family structure does not resolve its internal tensions; rather, such tensions are intensified over time.


### **The Father's Visual Absence: The "Othering" of the Father within the Family**

In the film *A Dog Barking at the Moon*, the visual presence of the father is often missing. This section posits that the film's *mise-en-scène* uses the absence of the father's image as a symbol to imply a father who has been 'othered' due to disrupting the norms of the patriarchal family. As discussed in the previous section, the father's homosexual orientation is revealed early in the film, leading to a transfer of power to the mother, Juimei. The emphasis on the mother's significant role within the family is a strong manifestation of this shift. The absence of the father's image can be seen as a representation of his marginalization, while also highlighting

how the remaining family members adapt to Huang Tao’s absence. Unlike the mother, the father is not confined by the family. Additionally, this section suggests that the film uses the father’s absence to depict the conflict between him and the mother. This conflict reflects the tension between those who adhere to traditional gender roles and those who do not.

**Table 3: *Mise-en-Scène* Analysis of Selected Scenes from *A Dog Barking at the Moon* (A Close-up of ‘Mother’ and ‘Daughter’ in the Scene)**

	<b>Denotation</b>	<b>Connotation</b>
		
Lighting	Dim artificial lighting.	The use of dim artificial lighting accentuates the mother’s inner anguish and underscores the oppressive nature of her environment
Composition	The mother is centrally positioned within the door frame, visually emphasising her role in the scene.	At the same time, she is physically and symbolically confined within the family space.
Setting	Inside the room, two chairs are placed, but only the mother occupies one of them.	The empty chair serves as a visual metaphor for the father’s absence.
Color	The image is dominated by a dark yellow tone.	This conveys the mother’s loneliness and emotional despair.


	<b>Denotation</b>	<b>Connotation</b>
		
Lighting	Dim natural light.	The shot conveys a sense of alienation between the characters.
Composition	The father is absent from the frame, leaving only the daughter visible. However, she is positioned on the right side of the frame, while the left remains empty.	This visual imbalance implies the father's unseen presence to her left, suggesting a deliberate absence. The composition symbolically highlights the daughter as the primary figure confronting the issue—the only character actively engaging in the search for resolution.
Color	Gray-blue tones.	By creating a somber atmosphere, the scene underscores the underlying tension within the family environment.


Myth: The father's failure to actively resolve internal family conflicts results in his absence from the family, relegating him to a 'marginal' character in the film. Consequently, the family's main figures are the mother and daughter. However, the family conflict confines the mother and daughter alone, while the father's absence suggests the myth that he can remain detached from family issues. This absence is not only physical but also emotional, reflecting the fissures present in family relationships.

**The Simultaneous Appearance of the daughter at Two Different Stages: A Symbolic Representation**

In the film, the mother—shaped by patrilineal norms—imposes these expectations onto her daughter. Through *mise-en-scène*, the film visually juxtaposes the daughter’s childhood and adulthood, collapsing temporal boundaries to emphasize emotional continuity. This chapter examines how such visual strategies reconstruct the daughter's grief within the family, revealing how familial influence shapes emotional life over time. The daughter's visual representation carries more symbolic than narrative weight, foregrounding affective memory over linear development.

**Table 3: *Mise-en-Scène* Analysis of Selected Scenes from *A Dog Barking at the Moon* (Two Versions of Xiao Yu from Different Periods Appear Together on the Playground & The Scene of Xiao Yu Sheltering from the Rain)**

		
	<b>Denotation</b>	<b>Connotation</b>
Lighting	Dim ambient lighting.	A daytime with dim sunlight.
Color	The color tone of the image is bright yellow.	Creating a comfortable outdoor space, it suggests a rare moment of ease.
Setting	The adult daughter walks ahead with her husband, while her younger self plays with a paper airplane in the background. The ground remains wet, with water that has not yet dried—suggesting a recent disturbance or emotional residue.	This juxtaposition suggests the imagined or subjective nature of the scene, as the adult and young daughter occupy the same space. Combined with the reflective dialogue, the scene can be interpreted as a manifestation of the daughter’s inner imagination. The wet ground symbolises her internal

		world and emotional scars, subtly externalising her psychological wounds.
		
	<b>Denotation</b>	<b>Connotation</b>
Lighting	The lighting becomes dim.	The sunlight has disappeared.
Composition	The father is absent from the frame, leaving only the daughter visible. However, she is positioned on the right side of the frame, while the left remains empty.	This visual imbalance implies the father's unseen presence to her left, suggesting a deliberate absence. The composition symbolically highlights the daughter as the primary figure confronting the issue—the only character actively engaging in the search for resolution.
Colour	The colour tone of the image shifts to a dark, cool tone.	This suggests a sudden change in the weather.
Setting	A sprinkler truck enters from the background, simulating rainfall. By this point, the young daughter has already exited the frame. Soon after, actual rain begins to fall, prompting the adult daughter to seek shelter.	The 'rain' that drives the young daughter away is produced by the sprinkler truck, while the real rain forces the adult daughter to flee. This juxtaposition blurs the line between illusion and reality, suggesting that the entire sequence may be a projection of Xiaoyu's imagination. She wishes that everything were fictional, yet the unfolding

		events reflect an inescapable truth.
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By placing the childhood and adult versions of Xiaoyu within the same frame, the film symbolically renders the persistence of unresolved familial trauma and intergenerational conflict. This visual strategy illustrates how familial discipline is not only temporally recursive but also embedded within the emotional architecture of the individual. The recurring motifs of paper airplanes and sprinklers further underscore how the desire for freedom becomes fragile and ineffectual within the affective constraints imposed by the family, emphasizing the constructed and repressive nature of familial order.

At the same time, the film depicts how patriarchal authority is sustained through maternal figures in the father's absence. The mother's emotional control over her daughter exemplifies how patriarchy is perpetuated through maternal discipline. The tension in the mother–daughter relationship arises not only from gendered expectations but also from the invisible transmission of patriarchal values across generations. Through its use of visual symbolism, the film accentuates the structural and deterministic nature of trauma and conflict, highlighting the difficulty of escaping the emotional reproduction of familial norms.

### **Power Imbalance Under Familial Conflict - The Mother's Centrality and the Father's Absence: A Dual Process of Internalization and Marginalization**

The film portrays familial relationships not as fixed binary roles but as part of a fluid and dynamic power structure. Although the three main characters appear to be victims within a traditional family framework, their interactions reveal more flexible and contradictory role negotiations. In other words, the positions of victim and perpetrator are not static but continually shifting. Each family member is both shaped by and reproduces discursive power, influencing one another's behaviour and perception. By emphasizing the instability and fluidity of power, the film exposes the inherent asymmetries within the family structure and highlights the complexity of familial roles constructed through competing and intersecting discourses.

In these images, the mother is positioned at the visual centre, surrounded by others in a circular arrangement that creates a panoramic, panoptic space. She functions as both the regulator and observer of power, exerting significant control over those around her.

The film reinforces the mother's central role in the family's power structure through stable visual composition and lighting. Frequently placed at the centre of the frame, with symmetrically arranged characters beside her, she symbolizes dominance. In contrast, the father is often marginalized or absent, seemingly diminishing his presence. However, this absence reflects Foucault's (1975) notion of panopticons—power persists through invisibility and delegation. The mother operates as a proxy for paternal authority, naturalizing disciplinary logic within the family. Like the central watchtower of a panopticon, she mediates power: supervising others while being subject to gendered norms herself. As both observer and observed, she maintains a fragile balance of order. This spatial-emotional power structure



reveals a self-regulating network shaped by both visible and invisible forces, rather than a singular authority.

The mother's central role in *Dog Barking at the Moon* functions as a complex visual and narrative metaphor. She is both an agent of discipline and a product of patriarchal subjugation. This duality illustrates the micro- and soft-power dynamics of contemporary patriarchy—where control is enacted not through overt violence but through the restructuring of emotion, space, and visual codes. The father's visual absence exempts him from direct surveillance, allowing him to evade maternal authority and establishing a subtle counter-power dynamic. His silence becomes a form of reverse surveillance, compelling both mother and daughter to self-regulate under his "mute gaze." This interwoven network of mutual observation disrupts binary oppositions between oppressor and victim, positioning all three—mother, father, and daughter—as simultaneously observers and the observed within an unstable web of domestic power.

### **The Daughter's Visualized Resistance and Discipline**

In the film, the mother enforces the daughter's obedience through emotional manipulation and moral discipline, leading to a childhood marked by sorrow. As Ahmed (2004) notes, emotions function as both effects and instruments of power. The daughter's visible emotions—expressed through silence and avoidance—serve as subtle resistance. Nonetheless, the visibility of affect simultaneously reinforces existing social structures and enables potential sites of resistance. This dual function underscores the family as a locus of biopolitical governance, wherein power is exercised not through explicit coercion, but through the internalization and regulation of affective norms embedded in quotidian relational practices.

The mother's dominant position does not reflect absolute authority, but rather a role assigned within a broader network of power. She occupies a dual position as both the governor and the governed. Consequently, the daughter's acts of resistance are not merely personal defiance against the mother, but symbolic challenges to the entire familial power structure. Through the tensions among mother, father, and daughter, the film illustrates the micro-level operations of power within the family—an underlying cause of its internal imbalance. As Foucault argues, power is not a top-down force but is exercised through discourse and disciplinary mechanisms that shape subjects. The family's internal conflicts and compromises exemplify the fluid, unstable, and reproductive nature of power, revealing the inherent fractures within traditional familial hierarchies.

### **Patriarchy in Contemporary Chinese Families: From Suppression to Pervasive Internalization**

When Foucault's conceptualization of power is applied to the context of contemporary Chinese patriarchy, it becomes evident that patriarchal authority in China has shifted away from the overtly hierarchical, male-dominated, Confucian model centered on paternal supremacy. Instead, what emerges is a more flexible, covert, and emotionally mediated form of "soft patriarchy." This form of Chinese patriarchy operates as a hybrid mode of power that combines



emotional manipulation with socially embedded normative expectations (Yan, 2003). As documented in *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999*, patriarchal power is reproduced less through explicit domination and more through affective ties and routine practices of everyday life. This transformation aligns closely with Foucault's argument that modern power operates not through visible violence, but through disciplinary mechanisms that permeate institutions such as the family, education, medicine, and law, thereby producing docile and self-regulating subjects.

The absence of the father figure in the film should not be interpreted merely as an act of resistance. From a feminist perspective, his disappearance may appear to undermine the symbolic authority of traditional patriarchy, suggesting a decentred visual strategy. However, in the specific context addressed by this study, the father's absence—as a homosexual man—functions less as subversion and more as a form of patriarchal exclusion. By omitting a male figure who fails to conform to normative gender expectations, the film reinforces patriarchal ideals of the “proper” male subject and delineates the boundaries of gender conformity. This absence, rather than disrupting the patriarchal structure, effectively sustains it through a proxy: the mother, whose authority is shaped by and operates within patriarchal logic. Such a delegated power arrangement not only disrupts the internal balance of the family but also demonstrates how patriarchy does not disappear with the erosion of overt authority; instead, it persists through flexible mechanisms of exclusion and substitution.

## **Conclusion**

The film *A Dog Barking at the Moon* interrogates the presumed legitimacy and sanctity of the traditional patriarchal family in contemporary China by exposing the emotional fissures and internal conflicts within the domestic sphere. Through a visual narrative analysis, this study demonstrates how the film constructs a fluid and unstable power structure within the family by centralizing the mother's position, intentionally rendering the father absent, and foregrounding the daughter's emotional responses. This configuration not only reveals the pervasive operations of disciplinary mechanisms in everyday life but also exposes the underlying logic of control and oppression that persists beneath the surface of intimate relationships.

By integrating Michel Foucault's theorization of disciplinary power and subject formation with Roland Barthes' mythological critique of cultural signification, this study contends that the film articulates a critical “anti-mythological” discourse. It subverts hegemonic familial paradigms that naturalize patriarchy as rational authority, motherhood as moral self-sacrifice, and daughterhood as passive obedience. Through the fluid and ambivalent positioning of characters between roles of domination and subjugation, the narrative foregrounds the contingent, irrational, and non-unidirectional logic underlying familial governance. In doing so, the film destabilizes the symbolic coherence of normative family structures and reveals the ideological operations that sustain their apparent legitimacy.

However, this strategy of “demythologization” is not absolute. The exclusion of the father from the visual and narrative space—due to his homosexuality—does not undermine the authority of the paternal figure. Rather, it reinforces patriarchal norms by delineating the

boundaries of acceptable masculinity. Simultaneously, the mother is compelled to assume the disciplinary role in his absence, becoming a surrogate agent of patriarchal authority. This substitution not only sustains the disciplining apparatus of the family but also reflects the patriarchal system's capacity for self-repair and continuity. Thus, while the film appears to critique traditional patriarchal logic, it inadvertently reaffirms its structural boundaries and functions.

This ambivalence renders the film's political stance structurally paradoxical: its critical gesture stops short of subversion, revealing instead the adaptive operations of contemporary patriarchy through mechanisms of flexibility, exclusion, and delegation. What the film ultimately exposes is not the demise of patriarchy, but its affective and symbolic regeneration within traumatic familial relations. It is through these unstable repairs and persistent fractures that the film becomes a reflective surface for interrogating the politics of the contemporary Chinese family.

At the same time, by applying Foucault's theory of discourse and disciplinary power alongside Barthes' mythological critique to the visual analysis of Chinese melodrama, this study offers a new interpretive paradigm. It bridges semiotics and cultural criticism, thereby opening a multidimensional analytical path for understanding the reproduction of familial power, gendered subjectivity, and the visual logics that underlie domestic narratives.

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