

# ‘My Motherland and I Are Never Apart’: Exploring the mother-Daughter Relationship in the Film *Spring Tide*

Jiang Wenyu, Wan Aida Wan Yahaya

College of Creative Art, University Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.9020010>

Received: 18 January 2025; Accepted: 22 January 2025; Published: 27 February 2025

## ABSTRACT

This article examines how Yang Lina’s *Spring Tide* (2019) deconstructs China’s myth of maternal sacrifice through the lens of the mother-daughter relationship. Combining Freud and De Jager’s theory of the symbiotic illusion with China’s sociohistorical context, the analysis reveals how generational trauma—rooted in the Cultural Revolution’s de-genderization and post-Reform individualism—shapes a toxic interdependency between a grandmother’s collectivist fervor and her daughter’s silent rebellion. By juxtaposing realist aesthetics with unresolved narrative closure, the film critiques the patriarchal and state apparatuses that weaponize filial piety, offering a radical departure from traditional Chinese cinema’s glorification of maternal benevolence. This study contributes to feminist film scholarship by reframing mother-daughter dynamics as allegories for China’s unresolved tension between socialist legacies and neoliberal individualism.

**Keywords:** mother-daughter relationship, misogyny, symbiotic illusion, social-historical context

## INTRODUCTION

According to Sigmund Freud, abandoning the idealized depiction of the omnipotent mother, whether as a divine being or as the ruler of childhood fantasy, is imperative for achieving sound development. In recent times, there has been a notable increase in the number of female directors who have embarked on a reassessment of the mother-daughter relationship within contemporary Chinese cinema. This reassessment, often termed a ‘revision,’ reflects a significant shift, particularly in films directed by women born after the 1970s, where the portrayal of mothers has moved away from traditional reverence. The ‘Sixth Generation’ of Chinese filmmakers grew up during the economic recovery that followed Reform and Opening-Up (1978 onwards). As Jiao Shigang pointed out, this generation received a systematic education within a relatively diverse and open cultural context and was exposed to a wide range of foreign film theories. They personally experienced the profound impact of economic reforms on social, interpersonal, and family relationships in China and witnessed the transformation of film from a sacred art form to an everyday cultural product. Their works no longer seek to create illusions to appease the world; instead, they focus more on social realities, particularly those often-considered taboo, and demonstrate the courage and sincerity to confront these realities head-on.

In these filmmakers, we can observe a spirit of subversion and deconstruction of traditional authority. The female filmmakers of this generation, in particular, have re-examined and reinterpreted traditional female roles and mother-daughter relationships in their works. Rather than shying away from the conflicts that arise between mothers and daughters, these filmmakers confront these issues directly, embedding them within broader historical and societal contexts. The growing recognition of female consciousness in China, coupled with the emergence of prominent female directors, has further fueled interest in this topic.

Films like *Spring Tide* (2019), directed by Yang Lina, exemplify this trend by focusing on the complex dynamics of affection and animosity within the mother-daughter bond. Through the shadow of the two central maternal figures, the film not only portrays a mother and wife who despises her husband and daughter but also a woman shackled by a patriarchal society. Yang Lina uses a documentary aesthetic to depict a family composed entirely of women, spanning three generations. The film’s use of realist cinematography vividly captures the pain and fragility of the Chinese family structure. While *Spring Tide* (2019) has sparked widespread discussion in China, particularly around issues of mother-daughter relationships and feminism, its scope extends beyond these themes. By exploring the mother-daughter relationship and the dynamics within this three-person household, the film

delves into the complexities of Chinese-style nationalism, collectivism, and the symbiotic relationship between individuals and the collective in the post-socialist era. This multidimensional portrayal not only highlights the emotional conflicts within the family but also reflects the broader interplay between individuals and the collective against the backdrop of significant social change and historical context.

This paper is structured into three main sections. The first section reviews the theoretical frameworks that inform the analysis. The second section applies these theories to a detailed examination of *Spring Tide* (2019). The third section discusses the broader implications of these findings for Chinese feminist cinema, with particular attention to how the film reflects the evolving relationship between the state and the individual. This article asks, how does *Spring Tide* (2019) subvert the Confucian ideal of maternal benevolence through its portrayal of a symbiotic yet destructive mother-daughter relationship? and In what ways does the film's sociohistorical context—spanning the Cultural Revolution to post-Reform individualism—reframe generational conflict as a critique of state ideology?

## SYNOPSIS OF SPRING TIDE

*Spring Tide* (2019) was co-produced by Changchun Film Group Corporation and first premiered at the Shanghai International Film Festival in 2019. In 2020, the film was released on the streaming platform iQiyi. The film tells the story of three generations of women living under the same roof, navigating a fraught dynamic filled with silent endurance, confrontation, and eventual emotional outbursts. Hao Lei portrays the character of Guo Jianbo, a news editor for a documentary publication, who, while reporting on the darker sides of society, also uncovers her own deep-seated wounds. Jin Yanan plays the role of Ji Minglan, the grandmother, a quintessential Chinese mother born in the 1950s and 60s. Outwardly, she is warm, beloved by her community, and an active organizer of local events. However, at home, she is a different person—self-pitying and overwhelmingly controlling towards her family. The young girl, Guo Wanting, portrayed as a top student, should be carefree, yet she becomes the natural mediator in the family. As she grows up, she increasingly recognizes the dysfunction surrounding her. The cycle of rebellion and resistance in the household comes to a halt as the grandmother is hospitalized. Although the two most significant male figures in this family (Ji's husband and Guo's husband) are physically absent, their presence lingers like ghosts, influencing and exacerbating the anger and resentment within the household.

The film was written and directed by Yang Lina. In *A letter To Spring Tide* (2019) Yang Lina reveals that many aspects of the film are drawn from her personal experiences, with the main setting of the film being her childhood home. The primary creative team behind the film hails from Japan and Taiwan, with the soundtrack composed by Japanese musician Yoshihiro Hanno, whose work frequently appears in films by directors Hou Hsiao-hsien and Jia Zhangke, lending the film a layer of realism. The cinematographer, Jake Pollock, an American with the Chinese name Bao Xuanming, is known for his work in films such as *The Message* (2009) directed by Gao Qunshuang and *the Shadow Play*. His dynamic and expressive cinematography breathes life into the scenes, and his minimalist, contemplative camera work in *Spring Tide* perfectly complements the film's tone. During location scouting, the team discussed at length how best to capture the dream sequences, ultimately deciding to abandon the original script's surrealistic and complex imagery in favor of a more realistic representation that aligns with the protagonist's emotions.



Figure 1: Ji Minglan, Guo Wanting and Guo Jianbo

## SYMBIOTIC ILLUSION IN CONFUCIAN CHINA: FROM FILIAL PIETY TO PATRIARCHAL CONTROL

“Freud and De Jager’s ‘symbiotic illusion’—a contractual exchange of love for submission—finds resonance in Confucian filial piety, where maternal ‘benevolence’ demands lifelong obedience, perpetuating patriarchal hierarchies.” The mother-daughter relationship occupies a pivotal role in the formation of gender identity and the shaping of female subjectivity. Drawing from the foundational principles of John Bowlby's attachment theory, this relationship can be understood as integral to the developmental trajectory of female individuals. Bowlby's theory posits that individuals are biologically predisposed to form attachments, particularly with their mothers, who often represent the primary caregiver figures. This innate predisposition underscores the profound impact of the maternal bond in the early stages of life.

Furthermore, Bowlby's framework suggests that the nature of the relationship between infants and their primary caregivers is instrumental in fostering their social and emotional development. Within this context, the mother-daughter dynamic is especially significant in constructing female subjectivity. However, it is inappropriate to directly apply Western theories to analyze Chinese gender issues or women's films. Therefore, in the following discussion, I will integrate Chinese history, social conditions, and values to provide an analysis.

In the context of traditional Chinese culture, significantly influenced by Confucian ideals, the concept of 'jiā tiānxià' — translating to 'Family as a Microcosm of the World' — holds a prominent position. This concept underscores the belief that effective governance and societal harmony are rooted in well-structured and cohesive family relationships, reflecting the pivotal role of the family in Chinese ethical thought.

Historically, in the Confucian framework, women's roles have often been marginalized, evident in their portrayal as adjuncts to male counterparts. This marginalization is exemplified by Confucius' aphorism, ‘wéi nǚrén yǔ xiǎorén nányǎng yě,’ which translates to 'only women and villains are hard to deal with,' and further reiterated in the writings of Zhongshu Dong, a renowned Han dynasty philosopher and proponent of Confucianism. Dong's assertion, ‘fū wèi qī gāng,’ or 'the husband is the guiding principle for the wife,' encapsulates the patriarchal underpinnings of traditional Chinese society.

The conventional ethical norms within this society extensively negate the individual identities of women, particularly in the roles of mothers and daughters. Narratives rooted in concepts like 'maternal benevolence' and 'daughterly filial piety' serve to internalize these roles as fundamental aspects of female identity, culminating in their subjugation to a male-dominated discourse that renders them symbolic within a paternalistic societal framework. This analysis is aligned with the structuralist interpretation of family structures by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who posited that familial constructs are fundamentally based on the exchange of women. Within this paradigm, a man typically acquires his wife through transactions with other men, leading to a familial network comprising husband-wife, parent-child, and extended kin relationships. Such exchanges, however, invariably contribute to the erosion of the woman's inherent significance.

In the realm of Chinese cinema, the portrayal of mothers and daughters has been a recurring theme, particularly evident in early films from the Republican era (1912-1949). For instance, in the film *The Orphan Rescues Grandfather* (1923), we encounter the character of Weiru Yu, a mother who, suspected of infidelity, is cast out by her husband and left to raise her son alone. In *The Goddess*, the protagonist, Ruan, is portrayed as a woman who sacrifices her body for the survival and well-being of her son. Similarly, in *The Spring River Flows East* (1947), we meet Sufen, a daughter who juggles the care of her son and husband with the responsibility of supporting her in laws. In these films, whether in the role of a mother or a daughter, female characters are utilized in the narrative to reinforce traditional notions of women's moral responsibilities, characterized by self-sacrifice and tireless devotion. Furthermore, women in these movies are primarily depicted in relation to male characters - as the mother of a son or the daughter of a father. Rarely do we see another female character actively participating in the narrative.





Figure 2: The Orphan Rescues Grandfather (1923)

As China entered the post-socialism era, the status of women in the film industry significantly improved, especially for female directors born after the 1970s. These directors demonstrated a strong awareness of gender issues, and the theme of mother daughter relationships became a focal point in their creations due to the importance in women's life experiences. This phenomenon reflects the cultural changes brought about by rapid economic and social development, as well as the continuous elevation of women's status. Instead of perpetuating the myth of the omnipotent mother, *Spring Tide* (2010, Yang) deconstructs and subverts this narrative by portraying a mother with a 'symbiotic illusion' and a toxic mother-daughter relationship.

**Breaking the Traditional Narratives of Mother-Daughter Relationships: The Mutual Immersion of Symbiotic Illusion** With the awakening of female consciousness, research increasingly focuses on the mother-daughter relationship. The study of this relationship can be traced back to Sigmund Freud (1905), who acknowledged that the Oedipus complex, which involves a child's feelings of desire for the opposite-sex parent and jealousy toward the same-sex parent, applies more strictly to boys. Freud was hesitant to fully endorse the Electra complex as a parallel for girls, noting that female psychosexual development was more complex and not fully understood.

The term Electra Complex was suggested by Carl Jung as a counterpart to the Oedipus complex, which applies to boys. The Electra complex is a psychoanalytic concept that describes a girl's psychosexual competition with her mother for possession of her father. It is named after the Greek mythological character Electra, who plotted to kill her mother. However, Jung did not further develop the concept of the mother-daughter relationship. Feminists like Simone de Beauvoir and Juliet Mitchell critiqued both the Electra Complex and the Oedipus Complex as phallogocentric and reinforcing patriarchal ideology.

Freud, Hendrika C., and Marjolijn De Jager analysed Electra's internal experience and suggested that a girl's first love object is often her mother, arguing that girls begin their life in a homosexual love. However, they also pointed out that such a close bond could lead to difficulty in separation between mother and daughter, resulting in a symbiotic illusion, which is defined as 'the mutual psychological involvement that leads to extreme interdependence and refers to the inseparability of the mother inside the head of the daughter, and vice versa.

In families where this unhealthy mother-daughter relationship, marked by symbiotic illusion, exists, fathers are often absent or too uninvolved in their children's lives, leaving the children reliant on their mother. Ironically, the father's absence and conflict with the mother often lead to the father being idealized. Symbiotic illusion is a condition where the mother offers love on the condition that even as the child matures into adulthood, they must still unconditionally submit to the mother's demands and continually affirm how impossible life would be without her. This dynamic satisfies the strong narcissistic bond within the relationship. Freud also stated that the essence of symbiotic illusion is 'a contractual exchange, where the child gives up independence in exchange for love from the mother as well as seductive overindulgence and physical care.

This type of symbiotic parent-child relationship challenges the myth of unconditional maternal love. In the traditional Chinese context, as discussed in the previous section on filial piety and maternal benevolence, this

type of relationship appears more in line with a contractual form of parent-child interaction. Traditional Confucian thought, which emphasizes that 'the father is the guideline for the son', strongly asserts that children should unconditionally obey their parents' will.

Unlike previous filmmakers, the Sixth-Generation directors, represented by Yang Lina, dare to challenge such conventional authority, explicitly portraying the pain of love and hate in mother-daughter relationships in their films, such as *Spring Tide*.

### JI MINGLAN: A MOTHER SCARRED BY MAOIST UNIFORMITY

The director presents an intense mother-daughter relationship in the film *Spring Tide* (2019). Unlike traditional stories where the mother is kind and the daughter dutiful, or films where mothers and daughters support each other through hardships, *Spring Tide* portrays a mother, Ji Minglan, who is both domineering and vulnerable. Ji repeatedly undermines her daughter Guo Jianbo's role as a mother, sows discord between Guo and her daughter and humiliates her with harsh words. Simultaneously, she constantly complains about her husband, laments how she has single-handedly raised her daughter and granddaughter, and protests against the unjust treatment she endured in a patriarchal society that favored sons over daughters.

The film depicts a very realistic and specific Chinese context. Ji Minglan was born around 1950 in China, and during her adolescence, she experienced the Great Leap Forward (1957-1960) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). These formative years left an indelible mark on her, manifesting in her fervor for singing revolutionary songs, such as 'My Motherland and I, cannot be separated for even a moment' during a choir performance. In a seaside scene where Guo Jianbo sees a woman in red with long hair, it becomes evident that this figure represents Ji Minglan's younger self.

Through Ji's narration at a class reunion, it's revealed that she once had long hair and a love for the arts. However, due to the Cultural Revolution's 'de-genderizing' policies, Ji Minglan was forced to cut her hair short. The woman in red is a projection of the gentle mother Ji once was—a mother who existed but whom Guo Jianbo never knew. The long-haired mother only exists in Guo Jianbo's imagination as an idealized figure, and she ultimately disappears into the sea along with Guo Jianbo's deceased father.

Director Yang Lina's narrative of the mother-daughter relationship transcends the personal and delves into broader societal commentary, as evidenced by another symbolically rich sequence in the film. After her divorce, Ji Minglan turns to Buddhism. In Guo Jianbo's dream, her mother appears as a sheep, struggling as a doctor forcibly removes her from the house. In Buddhism, a sheep symbolizes those who blindly indulge in 'greed,' 'anger,' and 'ignorance,' unaware of the teachings of the Buddha (Mahaprajnaparamita Sastra). According to Freud's interpretation of dreams, dreams reflect the unconscious mind. On one level, the sheep represents Guo Jianbo's subconscious rejection of her mother's hypocrisy. On a deeper level, the sheep also symbolizes a scapegoat—Ji Minglan's harshness and belligerence are the scars left by the era she lived through.



Figure 3: Ji Minglan complaining about her mother's oppression

Her vulnerability stems from never having experienced a nurturing intimate relationship, whether from her family or her husband. In a culture that valued sons over daughters, Ji Minglan became the despised daughter of her family, and the asceticism of the Cultural Revolution replaced intimate relationships with revolutionary comradeship. For her, nationalism became the only narrative through which she felt visible. However, as a

mother, she is also a scapegoat of the times—a reality that Guo Jianbo can see but not fully understand. With this historical context, the dinner table scene becomes easier to comprehend. Ji Minglan accuses Guo Jianbo, a journalist within the state system, of treasonous behavior for reporting negative social news while drawing a state salary—a concept incomprehensible to someone of Ji Minglan's generation. In the film, Ji Minglan fails to realize that the true cause of her inability to achieve spiritual liberation is the scars left by the era she lived through. Instead, she attributes her suffering to her ghostly husband, whom she describes as a scoundrel who brought humiliation to her life. Ji Minglan's resentment toward her husband is so overt that even her granddaughter questions, 'Is it really appropriate to speak of your husband like this in front of others?' As Freud (2010) notes, in families where the father is absent, the mother's resentment often becomes increasingly projected onto her daughter. At home, Ji Minglan speaks harshly to her daughter and even uses her granddaughter as leverage in her conflicts with Guo Jianbo, attempting to usurp her daughter's role as a mother.

## GUO JIANBO'S SILENT REBELLION: POST-REFORM INDIVIDUALISM AS COUNTER-NARRATIVE

Unlike her mother, the daughter, played by Hao Lei, holds fond childhood memories of her father. She remembers him as a gentle man who took care of her during her first menstruation, providing her with her first experiences of encouragement and blessing. Guo Jianbo rejects her mother's hatred toward her father. Consequently, whenever Ji Minglan insults her deceased father, Guo Jianbo resists. Much of Ji Minglan's animosity toward Guo Jianbo stems from this rejection. As Erich Fromm has noted, 'We often see that a girl's Oedipus complex ends in an Electra complex, meaning she feels anger toward her mother and longing for her father.' Guo Jianbo's resistance to her mother is characterized by restraint and silence; in the first half of the film, although her mother constantly nags, we hardly see any dialogue between them. However, Guo Jianbo's life choices—having a child out of wedlock, refusing to marry, and maintaining an informal relationship with an artist lover—are acts of defiance against her mother. While she seems determined to protect her life choices in silence, she is actually using these choices to hurt and retaliate against her mother, which is also a manifestation of the symbiotic illusion—using her body to seek revenge against her mother. Another characteristic of the symbiotic illusion is that many women resolve their internal conflicts by directing hostility and aggression toward themselves, much like a masochist.

When this painful mother-daughter relationship is placed within the historical-social context with Chinese characteristics, we can find another layer of interpretation. Guo Jianbo, born in the 1980s, grew up during China's post-Reform and Opening-Up period, a time of rapid economic development and interaction with free-market and neoliberal policies. This period saw China's transition in various aspects, from production methods to social structures. In the post-socialist era, Chinese society increasingly prioritized individualistic factors in assessing happiness and life satisfaction, reflecting a shift toward greater individualism. This stark contrast with the collectivist era in which Ji Minglan lived is a significant source of the generational conflict that fuels the frequent clashes between mother and daughter.

Yang Lina's refusal to reconcile the mother-daughter conflict mirrors China's struggle to reconcile socialist collectivism with neoliberal individualism. In the closure scene, the camera lingers on Guo Jianbo's face as she whispers, "When you are quiet the world is also quiet, otherwise *one of us will die*"—a haunting metaphor for the impossibility of separating from a state that claims ownership over women's bodies. The film's open-ended conclusion rejects the Confucian ideal of familial harmony, instead echoing post-socialist China's fractured identity.

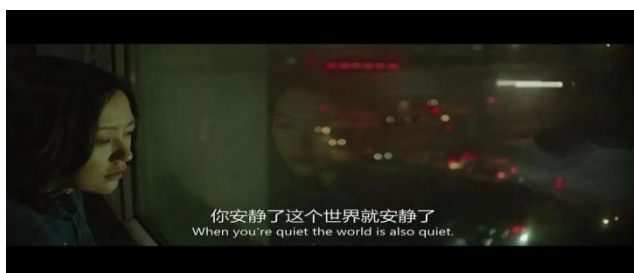


Figure 3: Guo Jianbo's silent gaze into the mirror reflects her entrapment between maternal guilt and individual desire.

## CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that *Spring Tide* (2019) transcends psychoanalytic readings of mother-daughter conflict to expose systemic oppression. For feminist filmmakers, the film's refusal to resolve familial strife serves as a radical act—rejecting state-sanctioned narratives of harmony. Future research could extend this framework to analyze how other post-2000s Chinese films, for example, Wang Xiaoshuai's *So Long, My Son* (2019) similarly critique intergenerational trauma. Practically, this study urges policymakers to recognize how state ideologies infiltrate domestic spaces, perpetuating cycles of gendered violence under the guise of traditional values.

## REFERENCE

1. Bowlby, John. Attachment and Loss, Vol. 1: Attachment. Attachment and Loss. Cai, Chusheng, and Zheng Junli, directors. Spring River Flows East. Kun Lun Film Company, 1947. 3 hr 30 min.
2. Freud, Hendrika C., and Marjolijn De Jager. *Electra vs Oedipus: The Drama of the mother-Daughter Relationship*. Routledge, 2010.
3. Freud, Sigmund. 1983. 'The Interpretation of Dreams.' In *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, 29–33. Columbia University Press.
4. Freud, Sigmund. 2013. "The Oedipus Complex." In *Sophocles*, 243–50. Routledge.
5. Gao, Qunshu, director. *The Message*. Huayi Brothers Media Co., Ltd., 2009. 2 hr.
6. He, Liang, and Lü, Huiyun. "The 'Symbiotic Illusion' in the Narrative of 'Mother-Daughter Relationship' in Recent Chinese Films."
7. Jin, Chunfeng, Zhu Xi's Philosophical Thought (Taipei: Dongda Books Co., Ltd., 2023)
8. Jiao, Shigang *Film Development Research: 1945–1949*.
9. Jung, Carl Gustav. 2015. The Oedipus Complex. In *Freud and Psychoanalysis*, vol. 4, 151–56. Routledge.
10. Lévi-Strauss, Claude, and Peter B. Kussell. Interview: Claude Lévi-Strauss. Vol. 1, no. 1.
11. Lou, Ye, director. *The Shadow Play*. Beijing Enlight Pictures Co., Ltd., 2016. 2 hr 4 min.
12. Steele, Liza G., and Scott M. Lynch. "The pursuit of happiness in China: Individualism, collectivism, and subjective well-being during China's economic and social transformation." *Social indicators research* 114 (2013): 441-451.
13. Wu, Yonggang, director. *The Goddess*. Lian Hua Film Company, 1934. 1 hr 3 min.
14. Yang Lina, 'A Letter to 'Spring Tide.' [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_3807559](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_3807559)
15. Zhang, Shichuan, director. *The Orphan Rescues Grandfather*. Mingxing Film Company, 1923. 1 hr 40 min.
16. Zou, Shunkang (邹顺康). 2014. "董仲舒 '三纲五常' 思想评析" [An Analysis of Dong. Zhongshu's 'Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues' Thought]. *道德与文明* [Morality and Civilization], no. 6: 17–20.