

The Expression of Female Agency in Eastern and Western Contexts: A Comparative Analysis of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Mulan* (1998), and *The Last Emperor* (1987)

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Abstract

This research article examines how the female agency is manifested across three films, namely *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000); *Mulan* (1998); and *The Last Emperor* (1987). The paper draws a comparison between different contexts in the East and the West on how expressions of cultural norms and values enhance female empowerment, independence, and self-determination. This paper analyzes how the Confucian ideal plays its role in Eastern representation while individualism with feminism influences Western depictions. Studies regarding gender dynamics have been approached in this case from the point of view of Hofstede's Five Cultural Dimensions. Gender role differentiation is particularly seen through the two dimensions of individualism versus collectivism and masculinity versus femininity. An interesting result emerges from the inquiry of a complex representation of female agency in perspective to different cultural contexts and how, in these, gender is constructed and contested in this kind of cinematic narrative.

Keywords: Female Agency, Confucian ideal, Individualism, Feminism, Hofstede's Five Cultural Dimensions.

1. Introduction

Female agency in films refers to the degree to which women can act and decide for themselves independently and constructively within the story. Cinema is a cultural product through which social norms and ideologies of the time are reflected and sometimes challenged (Chapman, 2003). This implies that looking at the ways women are portrayed in films can present a more wide-ranging approach towards social attitudes toward gender roles and female empowerment. The three films, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Mulan* (1998), and *The Last Emperor* (1987), are respectively chosen in the present research article because they offer a rich tapestry of cultural influences, particularly the Eastern tradition of Confucianism and Western feminist ideas. It is through these films that female characters act out their search for identity, role, and agency within varying cultural contexts. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Mulan* have their roots in Eastern traditions, especially Confucian values, which place great importance on values

like harmoniousness, duty, and respect for hierarchy. Such cultural values at times define female characters and usually lead to either reinforcement or challenging traditional roles. On the other hand, *The Last Emperor* presents a unique perspective by crossing Eastern and Western values into one, giving a broader framework when understanding the complexities of female agency. The main objectives of the paper are to identify how these films represent female agency in their respective cultural traditions and to study how these portrayals reflect or challenge traditional gender roles.

There are three guiding research questions that the study followed, namely:

1. How is female agency portrayed differently in Eastern and Western cinematic contexts, particularly in relation to the influence of Confucian ideals and feminism in the films *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Mulan*, and *The Last Emperor*?
2. In what ways do the cultural dimensions of collectivism versus individualism and masculinity versus femininity shape the representation of gender roles in the selected films?
3. How do the selected films reflect or challenge traditional gender roles within their respective cultural contexts, and how does the intersection of Eastern and Western values influence these portrayals, particularly in *The Last Emperor*?

2. Literature Review

The concept of female agency has been theorised in film scholarship as a key site through which cultural contexts have been seen to shape the presentation of gender roles. This paper examines the phenomenon of female agency in three films that represent both Eastern and Western cinematic traditions, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Mulan*, and *The Last Emperor*. This literature review charts research into existing scholarship on such films, focusing on issues of female agency, the tug of cultural values, and the crossing of gender dynamics from one cultural context to another.

2.1. Female Agency in Eastern Cinema

Female agency in Eastern cinema is often put within the framework of Confucian ideals, emphasizing social harmony, filial piety, and respect for hierarchy. These values were observed by scholars as usually placing women in the subordinated position, whose agency is strictly linked with the role they must play within the family and society. However, films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* have been commended for their multidimensional portrayal of women who engage in cultural restraints while expressing their autonomy. Cai, (2005), for instance, has identified that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a tool of female empowerment since the film provided the world with images of women who could exercise strength, independence, and leadership qualities, against their Confucian binding forces. Due to this, the characters Yu Shu Lien and Jen Yu execute a mode of agency in conduct that contradicts and challenges their naturalized cultural limits. These authors believe the film indeed presents an articulation of female empowerment, one enacted within culturally prescribed boundaries while challenging those very boundaries. *Mulan* has also garnered significant critical attention

regarding its representation of female agency in a Confucian social context. In fact, Limbach (2013) have examined how the film reworks the Chinese legend of Hua Mulan through its protagonist's trajectory from a dutiful daughter to a gender-disrupting warrior. The character of Mulan thus personifies the tension between individual desires and social duties that centralize Confucian ideals of selfhood. On one hand, the film reinforces such normative gender roles, but on the other, it simultaneously subverts these roles by portraying Mulan's actions as both subversive and ultimately reinforcing social harmony. This ambivalence has been a key point of discussion in the literature since such aspects form part of the complex functioning of female agency in Eastern cinematic narratives.

2.2. Female Agency in Western Cinema

Much of Western cinema is filtered through feminist and individualist analyses that foster ideas of personal freedom, self-expression, and misanthropy. Under such guidance, the female agency may be portrayed as a rebellion against societal expectations, women acting out their independence and refusing to stay within the strictures of gender roles. This theme is recurrent in *The Last Emperor*, a movie widely studied for representing the interplay of Eastern and Western values during a period of great cultural and political flux. Chow (2007) has examined how *The Last Emperor* explores the confusions of female agency in a society of rapid transformation. Tensions of tradition and modernity, East and West, are nowhere more talked over than in those characters of Empress Wanrong and Wenxiu. That Empress Wanrong adhered to Western customs and fought for independence has been taken as symbolic of greater cultural shifts in early 20th-century China. Her ultimate breakdown into insanity serves to reflect the limits of female agency in a context where the traditional values are powerfully ascendant. The film offers a densely nuanced consideration of the challenges with which women often grapple when attempting to assert their independence within a society torn between contending cultural pulls. In contrast, Wenxiu's decision to divorce Puyi and leave the Forbidden City has more often been regarded as a more successful assertion of individual agency, reflecting the greater inroads into Chinese society of Western ideas concerning gender and individual rights. Even here, however, scholars also note accompanying Wenxiu's quest for independence a haunting sense of isolation and alienation, gesturing toward the personal costs of challenging deeply entrenched cultural norms. It is this that now underscores female contingencies of agency in a transitional cultural context where traditionally held values are always negotiating with modern ones.

2.3. Gaps in the Literature

The existing scholarship adds a great deal of value for understanding how female agency has been portrayed films. However, there still remains a few major gaps that the present research aims to address. First, the intersection of Eastern and Western values in the depiction of female agency needs further analysis, in particular for *The Last Emperor*. While much attention has gone to the ways selected films challenge conventional gender norms, less emphasis has been placed on understanding how these portrayals reflect or reinforce cultural values relating to collectivism and individualism and the constructs of masculinity and femininity. The detailed investigation of how female agency and gender dynamics have been represented in the films requires an elaborate analysis of the cinematographic techniques and visual symbolism used.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Female Agency in Film

This section explores the concept of female agency and how it has been theorised within film studies. One such fundamental theory is that proposed by Laura Mulvey in respect to the male gaze. She (2013) said that mainstream cinema has often placed women in the role of passive objects of male desire. According to Mulvey (2013), films are conventionally produced from a male point of view, wherein female characters are visually and narratively depicted and told in objectified manners that reduce their agency. They often depend on the female as passive, her actions and choices secondary to their objectification by men. In this regard, the current scholarship marks a pushed forward Mulvey's work in highlighting instances where there is subversion of the male gaze through female characters themselves. Herein, the woman is regarded as an active agent acting in total disregard to typical gender parameters which provokes control in the context of the narrative.

The Confucian ideals in Eastern cinema often place women in a very repressive hierarchical framework with very little agency. Confucianism, as an inculcated philosophical system within Eastern societies, fosters such values as duty, respect for hierarchy, and social harmony (Gardner, 2014). These values often find expression through characters who would rather sacrifice themselves for family and societal obligations than act to fulfil their personal needs. However, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Mulan* complicate such a narrative in the ways the representation of female characters displays agency in radical and subversive ways despite such constraints.

3.2. Cultural Influence on Gender Dynamics

The Five Cultural Dimensions of Hofstede, developed by a social psychologist, Geert Hofstede, is a theoretical framework that can help understand how cultural values shape both behaviour and social structures. Of the five dimensions, two bear special relevance for a study centred around gender dynamics in film, which are individualism vs. collectivism and masculinity vs. femininity (Hofstede, 2011). Individualism vs. Collectivism looks at how much a society emphasizes individual independence versus group integration. In individualistic cultures, which is true for most of the Western world, there is a widespread encouragement for individuals to focus on their personal goals and desires, often meaning female characters are much more independent and self-sufficient. By contrast, most Eastern societies have been described as collectivist cultures, which prioritize social harmony and family integrity, so tend to offer images of women that are socially more constrained, with their individual agency directly related to their status inside the family and community. Masculinity vs. Femininity, on the other hand, considers how a culture reinforces traditionally masculine traits, such as competitiveness and aggressiveness, compared to traditionally feminine traits, such as nurturing and collaboration. In high-masculine cultures, the roles of men and women are more defined, with clear expectations in behaviours. In cultures considered more feminine, roles are more fluid, and both men and women are encouraged to embody a broader range of traits and behaviours.

4. Methodology

4.1. Film Analysis

This paper is methodologically embedded in the close analysis of selected scenes from the three films chosen, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Mulan*, and *The Last Emperor*. These have been selected due to their prominence regarding female agency and relevance to the broader cultural and gender dynamics explored here. The scenes that would be required must be analyzed in depth regarding the dialogue, visual aesthetics, and cultural symbols applied that attribute to the female character presentations. This includes how the characters interact with their environment, their relationships in terms of power dynamics, and how their actions conform to or resist hegemonic gender ideals. This will also include the narrative arc of each film to show how the unfolding of female agency is developed and resolved within the storyline. This will give an extensive view of how each film navigates the tension between cultural values and gender dynamics.

4.2 Cultural Analysis

Apart from the film analysis, this paper will also conduct a cultural analysis of the time period and societal norms that dictated gender representations in the selected films. This encompasses an analysis of Confucian ideals that shape gender roles in Eastern cinema and how individualism and feminism affect Western cinematic portrayals of women. Guided by Hofstede's Five Cultural Dimensions of particular interest to this analysis are the dimensions of individualism vs. collectivism and masculinity vs. femininity. The following situates the films within their respective cultural contexts and will demonstrate how cultural values shape portrayals of female agency and how such portrayals reinforce or go against traditional gender roles.

4.3. Comparative Analysis

The final methodological approach is the comparative analysis of the three selected films. This would allow for a cross-comparison between the three films in relation to the representation of gender roles and cultural values that influence or determine female agency in each context. This comparative analysis will focus on the key themes identified in the respective film and cultural analyses regarding how these have emerged in an Eastern or Western cinematic context. This will include a comparative juxtaposition of the cultural symbols, dialogue, and visual aesthetics across both films in terms of female agency representation and then draw on how these elements reflect or confront societal expectations around conventional gender norms.

5. Findings

5.1. Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is set within the environs of a mythic ancient China where the martial arts heroes known as wuxia must conduct their lives in a restrictive world bound by stringent codes of honour and loyalty. The film operates against the Confucian values of social harmony, respect for authority, and regard for the performance of duty (Chong, 2020). Such values instil a threshold within which they, the two female protagonists, Yu Shu Lien and Jen Yu, must function. It is to this aspect that tension between these traditional values and the desires

of the characters to be autonomous and independent lies at the heart of the film's consideration of female agency.

5.1.1. Yu Shu Lien: The Dutiful Warrior

Yu Shu Lien is a warrior and leader played by Michelle Yeoh and presents a mode of female agency that is highly congenial with Confucian values. Throughout the movie, Yu Shu Lien is developed as a figure of strength, wisdom, and loyalty (Gomes, 2005). Of course, her expertise in martial arts and leadership qualities place her in another league altogether from that presented by typical traditional Chinese film females, who are often relegated to domestic roles. Yet, independent and strong-spirited as she is, her sense of duty and loyalty toward her family and community greatly circumscribes Yu Shu Lien's agency. Yu Shu Lien is a character emblematic of the Confucian ideal of *xiao*, or filial piety, the guiding principle for the performance of an individual by appealing to one's responsibility to family and ancestors (Zhang, 2022). This is manifested in the loyalty to her deceased fiancé Meng Sizhao and her commitment to her responsibilities as a keeper of the Green Destiny sword. Notice that all Yu Shu Lien's actions are implored by the great sense of duty, which in many instances requires suppression of one self-desires and emotions. For instance, her silent love for a fellow warrior, Li Mu Bai, is not realized simply because she feels loyalty to another, Meng Sizhao, representing the Confucian ideal of placing duty above personal happiness. Despite such limitations, Yu Shu Lien's character evidence resistance against traditional gender roles by filling in one of the higher roles set aside for men. She is, therefore, a master amongst her peers within the martial arts world, commanding respect from her male counterparts. She enacts an empowered-yet-constrained female agency. The multidimensionality of Yu Shu Lien's agency in the film brings out the complexity of navigating traditional values for independence.

5.1.2. Jen Yu: The Rebellious Youth

Unlike Yu Shu Lien, whose agency is dutiful and restrained, Jen Yu, played by Zhang Ziyi embodies an oppositional female agency. A young aristocrat secretly training in martial arts, Jen Yu comes into being in opposition to the expectations her family and society place upon her. This motivates her further to steal the Green Destiny sword and go on a self-discovery journey where she fights against traditional gender roles that had been placed upon her by society (Stewart, 2002). Jen Yu's character shows the tension between individualism and collectivism in Eastern culture quite effectively (Huang, 2006). On the one hand, she strives for personal freedom and autonomy; on the other hand, she rejects her aristocratic upbringing, and the marriage arranged for her by her family. On the one hand, while her actions are meritorious in this respect, they also represent an impediment to already constituted social cohesion and order insofar as they disrupt the established equilibrium of power in the sphere of martial arts and, consequently, stretch the boundaries of observance to her elders. The film represents Jen Yu's struggle as one of internal and external conflict. Indeed, her striving for independence goes against the role and position of a woman in society and causes her to make one choice after another, which results in tragedy. Jen Yu's story is intertwined with quite empowering moments, such as her one-on-one dual with male warriors where she shows exceptional martial skills, which were, believed by society to be reserved for women who were innately weaker than men. Yet, all these moments of agency are also curtailed by the repercussions of her actions, which

result in her isolation, betrayal, and loss. Perhaps the arc of Jen Yu speaks most to how traditionalist gender expectations and societal pressures constrain her. Her rebellion against this both empowers and destroys herself and is a complex navigation of female agency within a Confucian framework.

5.1.3. Cinematic Techniques and Symbolism

Director Ang Lee uses a variety of cinematic techniques to bring forth one of the themes of this film: female agency. The action sequences within this film are allegorical representations of the inner battles that the characters endure (Yi, 2011). This is evident through the iconic fight scenes between Yu Shu Lien and Jen Yu, where grace and fluidity in the martial arts choreography mirror the character's control over their bodies and minds. Similarly, through intense and nuanced choreography, the emotional and psychic confusion the characters are going through is accentuated. Visual symbolism throughout the film also represents female agency. The Green Destiny sword, for example, is a symbol of masculine power, which is highlighted by Yu Shu Lien's warning to Jen Yu, "Don't touch it! That's Li Mu Bai's sword!" (Zhang, 2021). As Chan (2004, p.12) asserts, the sword is "a phallic symbol of Jiang Hu authority" that becomes a symbol of Li Mu Bai's male sex organ and power. Thus, touching or stealing the sword by female characters can be seen as a form of rebellion or rejection of male power. Harmony and balance, in terms of the aesthetic of the movie itself, extend the Confucian ideal to include the natural landscape of beauty and traditional Chinese architecture. It is here that the juxtaposition in tone is realized: peaceful, harmonious settings offset against intense, chaotic action scenes. This would suggest a tension between the autonomy-seeking characters and the strong cultural expectations placed upon them.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon addresses the question of female agency from within a Confucian context. Two of its female protagonists, Yu Shu Lien and Jen Yu, narrate ways of treading the thin line between tradition and autonomy. The voyages of the two, respective to each, the film opens into several ways of operating female agency within a cultural schema that insists on the primacy of duty, harmony, and social order. This is further advanced by how the film uses cinematography as a medium along with visual symbolism to give a multi-layered presentation of female empowerment and constraint.

5.2. Mulan

Mulan is a Disney animation loosely based on the Chinese legend Hua Mulan, who took her father's place in the army by disguising herself as a man. The film is set in the context of ancient China, a mythic land in which Confucian ideals of filial piety, loyalty, and respect for hierarchy play an important part in the plot (Ding, 2024). As in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Mulan also presents conflicts between individual desires and social duties, particularly in terms of gender roles.

5.2.1. Mulan: The Dutiful Daughter and a Warrior

Mulan, as her leading lady character, embodies female subjectivity both transgressively and thoroughly enmeshed with the gamut of expectations in her culture. It dressed as a man and joined the army out of a sense of duty to her family, mostly to her ailing father, who was unfit to

carry out his duties concerning military conscription. This filial piety in *Mulan* then connects with Confucian values, or more importantly, those actions that focus on loyalty and respect for one's family (Hsieh & Matoush, 2012). On the other hand, by going against the norm and assuming a male identity, *Mulan* puts into question the rigid conventional role of gender. The established order is disrupted, and that which has been considered as women's intrinsic unsuitability for traditionally male roles is contested. Her journey as a warrior not only subverts traditional gender expectations but also brings into light the problematics of female agency within the Confucian way. Throughout the movie, *Mulan* is depicted as an empowered yet constrained cultural figure, her actions directly oppose the patriarchal structures that confine women to domestic roles (Wang, 2022). Success on the part of the protagonist in the military, in which she proves as capable as, if not more than, her male counterparts, serves as a powerful statement of female empowerment. On the contrary, *Mulan* never acts under the influence of purely personal interests but follows her obligation to her family and country, thereby putting her in line with Confucian principles.

5.2.2. The Tension Between Individualism and Collectivism:

Mulan also explores the notion of individualism versus collectivism, with *Mulan's* arc being a balance between personal ambition and the needs of the collective. Initially, her decision to go to war is a personal one, motivated by her love for her father and the urge to protect him. However, as the story unfolds, *Mulan's* actions take on a broader significance, with her becoming a symbol of resistance and empowerment for all the women in her society (Lailawati et al., 2020). This film represents *Mulan's* transformation from a dutiful daughter into a warrior challenging traditional gender norms. Her journey is one of self-discovery and empowerment, navigating the challenges of war and proving her worth as a soldier. Most representative of her agency in the final battle scenes is when *Mulan* leads her comrades to victory, showing her strategic thinking, courage, and leadership skills. However, *Mulan's* agency is also modelled through the expectations of her own culture. Ultimately, it is the recognition and reward bestowed by the emperor himself for serving one's country that cements her place in the military. This kind of recognition reinforces the Confucian ideal of loyalty to the collective and indicates that *Mulan's* agency finds its fullest expression when aligned with the needs of her society.

5.2.3. Cinematic Techniques and Symbolism

The directors Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook have used various cinematic techniques to underscore the points of female agency in the film, the whole animation style is colourful and fluid, in line with *Mulan's* dynamic and changing journey. Colours, especially, point out that *Mulan's* identity has gone through so many changes; the development from a young lady at home to becoming a great soldier in the army marks different colour transitions in the movie. Music and song also play important roles regarding female agency in this film. The first song, "Reflection" by *Mulan*, shows inner conflict and yearning for self-discovery, which is a starting point toward her journey of empowerment (Yang, 2024). Later, the song "I'll Make a Man Out of You" serves as a commentary on stereotypical gender roles because *Mulan* is put through hard training in order to prove herself a soldier. These juxtaposed songs reflect the tension between the desires of *Mulan* internally and the expectations set upon her from the outside world. Throughout the movie, much of the visual symbolism was seen to further establish its explication

of female agency. The haircutting scene visually signifies the discarding of traditional notions of femininity in the acceptance of a new identity as a warrior. The recurring motif of the phoenix becomes indicative of Mulan's rebirth and transformation; she rises from the ashes of her previous life and rebirths into becoming a hero.

The question of female agency perhaps best captures, in one delicate poise, the tension between tradition and modernity, individualism and collectivism within the Confucian tradition. The film tends to indicate that though women will be under constraint because of cultural expectations, there is also a place for them to redefine these roles and assert their autonomy both meaningfully and transformatively. Using cinematic techniques, symbolism, and music, *Mulan* develops a complex look at the female power struggle within a traditional cultural framework.

5.3. The Last Emperor

The Last Emperor by Bernardo Bertolucci provides a more complex or layered look at women's agency because their agency intersects both Eastern and Western cultural values. The film is set against the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the rise of modern China, an era of great cultural and political upheaval (Cheng, 2019). The story focuses on Puyi, the last emperor of China, and his life with women, particularly his wife, Empress Wanrong, and one of his consorts, Wenxiu. These characters, then, become representatives of these larger cultural and political changes that have taken place in China during this era, so that their struggles for independence and agency in relation to these changes become all too familiar.

5.3.1. Empress Wanrong: The Tragic Figure of Tradition and Modernity

In *The Last Emperor*, Joan Chen plays Empress Wanrong, a representative of the long struggles between tradition and modernity. Being the wife of the last emperor, she figures first as an icon of traditional authority and dignity, an embodiment of values from the imperial court (Muning, 2023). However, Wanrong is confined and has little agency in her life. Soon, it translates to her addiction to opium and, finally, going mad, which is a metaphor for the greater disintegration of the Qing Dynasty and the old order it represents. Wanrong is a character that represents the tensions between old and new China in her striving to please the conflicting demands of both tradition and modernity. By dressing and following the customs of the West, as well as through her multiple relationships with Western diplomats, Wanrong made known her desires to transcend traditional roles set before her feet and to state her identity. It is such an agency, put inside surrounding cultural and political straits, which will finally be bound to a tragic ending. It is a fable about Wanrong, the fragility of female agency in a society leading to changes at an unprecedentedly fast clip. She never could free herself from the chains of patriarchy, which was portrayed by all appearances of declaring independence to be an attempt to declare her independence within the imperial court and political maelstrom that roiled the time period. This impossibility of reconciliation among these forces finds testimony in her gradual descent into madness, underlining the futility and self-destruction that such pursuit of self-autonomy entails in such a context.

5.3.2. Wenxiu: The Rebellious Consort

Compared to the tragic fate of Wanrong, Wenxiu, played by Maggie Han, constitutes another agency reproduced within *The Last Emperor*. Puyi's consort, Wenxiu, at the beginning of her life, acts suitably according to the role put upon her, but later, she seeks divorce, which is an act against both the Confucian Way of Life and the patriarchal structures of their society (Moyer, 1997). The subsequent independent life of Wenxiu was an interruption in the traditional patterns, closer to individualism, which reflected the growing influence of Western ideas at the time on Chinese society. Wenxiu's character arc thus stands in for the potentials and pitfalls thrown up to female agency in a period of transition. Divorcing Puyi, walking out of the imperial court, is a real statement of autonomy challenging conventional roles posed upon women by her society. On the other side, Wenxiu's actions are also rendered problematic and disruptive because they bring out tension between individual desire and social expectation. Instead, Wenxiu's tale becomes one of a grand voyage in feminine enterprise through fluctuating cultural and political values. Her decision to come into her own independence is alienating empowerment, one must come to grips with the aftermath created by such a challenge to order. Throughout her agency, it is how this change represents a kind of microcosm of wider cultural fluctuation presently at work in China, in that new values are beginning to contest and redefine more traditional ones in the light of modernity.

5.3.3. Cinematic Techniques and Symbols

The theme of women's agency in *The Last Emperor* is played out through a variety of cinematic approaches by the director, Bernardo Bertolucci. The colouring and lighting in the film reflect both the changes in fortune and the mood of its characters (Coates, 2017). The richly coloured and opulent scenes of the imperial court give way to stark, muted tones in later scenes, both reflecting the decline of the Qing Dynasty and the influence of Western ideas. Setting also holds prime importance in the way limitations to the female agency are represented in the film. With its labyrinthine corridors and shut doors, the Forbidden City also acts metaphorically to speak about the confinement and isolation that female lead characters fall prey to. The barriers of the palace reflect social and cultural barriers that stand in the way of their autonomy, further building into a sense of entrapment and powerlessness. Bertolucci reinforces the ideas of tradition versus modernity through the appropriate use of visual symbolism. For example, how Wanrong passes into Western fashion symbolizes her attempt to delve into a more modern approach to life and break free from the shackles. On the other hand, it is in the opium pipe that she uses that a semblance of the forces of destruction that eventually overtake her is iterated, symbolizing how impossible it is to be free of those shackles.

The Last Emperor is a multilayered look at female agency, as it crosses both Eastern and Western cultural values. The female characters of the film, especially Empress Wanrong and Wenxiu, personify the tensions between tradition and modernity that were happening in early 20th-century China. It captures female agency through camera techniques, symbolism, and character development as a mirror to the greater cultural and political changes occurring during this period. It suggests that even while women in this context began to rebel against the traditional gender role, their agency was heavily hamstrung by the cultural and political forces at play. The result is an outcome predominantly tension-ridden, contradictory, and compromised.

6. Discussion

6.1. Cultural Influences on Female Agency

6.1.1. Confucian Ideals and Eastern Cinematic Traditions

It is at the heart of the cultural paradigm in Eastern societies, specifically in those where the teachings of Confucius have had the most influence, that one finds this call for social harmony, duty, and respect for hierarchy. It is this Confucian ethos that has survived well into the modern era to influence and define gendered roles, positioning women in ways that guarantee agency will always be tied to family and social obligations (Mun, 2015). Perhaps this represents the most pertinent cultural backdrop underpinning both *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Man* and their female characters negotiating complex personal desire and societal expectation dialectics. Confucianism assumes that all members of society fulfil a defined role, and proper fulfilment of one's role constitutes the root of social harmony. In practice, it often puts women in a position where they are to assume whatever roles are placed on them through their relationships with other people, such as daughter, wife, mother-and who places her aspirations and wishes after those of the family and greater community. These are roles that, while bringing purpose and identity, also have tremendous brakes on female agency and constrain further questing by women for independence beyond the given social paradigm. Yu Shu Lien of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* fully epitomizes this tension. In many ways, this character is adorned with masculine qualities and a leader yet circumscribed in her agency, by her sense of duty to family and adherence to the values of Confucianism. She has sacrificed much in her life, for example, the loss of her love with Li Mu Bai to continue upholding her loyalty to her fiancé who died, a fact that further ascertains how the Confucian ideals have bordered on her decisions and curtailed her agency. Despite this strength and independence, Yu Shu Lien is bound in her action because of her strong responsibility for the maintenance of social harmony, the Confucian ideal of placing collective good over self-desires.

On the other hand, Jen Yu displays more penetrating female agency. Her character, in fact, goes entirely against the grain in the traditional Confucian framework as she pursues her desires at the expense of social disruption (Lee, 2003). Her stealing of the Green Destiny sword and refusing an arranged marriage served only to put Jen outside those social norms that Confucianism would ordain appropriate. Yet, her internal struggles and the consequences imposed from without starkly frame a limitation of the cultural values she seeks to deny herself. Jen Yu's tragic arc therefore suggests that while Confucian society may bind female agency, the capability of breaking out of such bindings ensues with alienation and bereavement, showing how deeply such value judgments have been inculcated into the character of the individual and societal stability. Mulan expresses a somewhat different point of contention with the incorporation of themes on filial piety as well as individualism. Mulan's actions are done out of duty bound to her family, an action and belief system very much Confucian. Yet, at the same time, her decision to dress herself as a man and enlist in the army reflects a challenge against traditional gender expectations. The tension between Mulan's own ambitions and obligations to family and society is tenuously negotiated throughout the film. In the end, it resolves by suggesting that female agency can be exercised within, rather than against, the Confucian framework. Mulan's military success does not constitute a negation of her cultural heritage but

rather a re-articulation of the same in which her agency acts to reinforce social harmony, not destroy it. This, indeed, constitutes the Confucian ideal of the superior person, beyond the reach of traditional roles to achieve the highest possible position of virtue and responsibility.

6.1.2. Popular Western Cinematic Traditions and Individualism:

Western cinema, especially in the 20th century, has been greatly influenced by values of individualism and feminism. It is a cultural movement that speaks to the autonomy of the person, self-expression, and gender equality, placing the female character often at the forefront of change toward resisting or challenging patriarchal structures (Sikka et al., 2010). Contrastingly with the collectivist orientation in Confucian societies, Western individualism develops the right of an individual for which characters are enabled to go after their own goals and desires against societal norms. *The Last Emperor* offers a unique lens to consider the intersection of Eastern and Western values. Set in a time when China's cultural and political convulsion tore it asunder, the film provides points on these characters' collision of two worldviews: Empress Wanrong and Wenxiu represent the two important tensional women figures in the film-tradition and modernity, East and West. It therefore makes Empress Wanrong metaphorically bursting herself free from the confines set upon her by traditionalist expectations through embracing Western customs and fashions. However, it is the cultural and political forces around her that finally deny her true autonomy. Wanrong's addiction to opium and her descent into madness parallel that destruction and insinuate that a struggle for individualist autonomy within rigidly hierarchical and patriarchal societies can only be self-destructive. Wanrong's character arc underlines precisely how difficult negotiation would be over female agency in a context where cultural values are in flux because the imposition of Western individualism upon Eastern tradition created deep and often insurmountable conflicts. By contrast, Wenxiu is a more successful assertion of individual agency within this transitional context. This decision to divorce Puyi and leave the Forbidden City was a rather bold denial of traditional roles set upon her. Wenxiu's story says as much to the difficulties and dangers of such an agency in a social environment to which tradition still clings tenaciously. Wenxiu's exit from the imperial court is replete with twists of empowerment and isolation-the personal cost of social change in the deeply entrenched cultural norm. With Wanrong and Wenxiu, *The Last Emperor* crystallizes the play of the values between East and West and the organic contradictions that arise with this sort of cultural collision. The movie insinuates that in as much as Western individualism opened new avenues for women's emancipation, these avenues were often fraught with immense challenges as women struggled to live out both traditional and modern expectations.

6.2. Gender Dynamics and Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

6.2.1. Individualism vs. Collectivism

Hofstede's individualism versus collectivism cultural dimension is helpful in contextualizing female agency within the selected films. In a collectivist setting, much as the movies *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Mulan* are viewed, individual identity becomes submerged into the interest of the group. In such a setup, there is often a call for women to put the interests of the family and society ahead of personal yearnings, the agency is closely placed within the roles they should represent in the collectives. In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the agency of Yu Shu

Lien is deeply intertwined with her sense of duty to family and community (Stewart, 2002). She acts to restore social harmony and pay due respects, this in itself is an act of the Collectivist orientation of Confucian society. Similarly, Mulan's decision to join the army is compelled by her responsibility towards her family and hence depicts a female agency in the collectivist culture exercised often in the service of the collective good. The two characters thus reveal that while the female agency can be strong in a collectivist society, it takes form and finds its limitation in the balance between personal freedom and social obligations. In contrast, *The Last Emperor* measures the effects of Western individualism on female agency within a traditionally collectivist society. For example, both Empress Wanrong and Wenxiu pursue independence from dominating men; in returning to such instincts, they adhere to values of individualism, where personal freedom overrides collective responsibility. At the same time, however, their experiences demonstrate the disorientation and anger at being and asserting such an agency within a context where the root of that such collectivist values is highly influential. The film depicts how individualism while providing scaffolding for female empowerment, may struggle with the expectations of a collectivist society and bring about tensions and conflicts.

6.2.2. Masculinity vs. Femininity

Another important dimension by Hofstede is masculinity versus femininity, which holds a great deal of relevance for the valuing of any given culture regarding traditionally masculine traits, such as competitiveness and assertiveness, in contrast to traditionally feminine ones, such as care and cooperation. Patriarchal cultures have very well-defined, rigid roles for men and women where the expectations from men are mostly based on their ability to be forceful and dominant, whereas those for women focus on being encouraging and supportive (Kochuthara, 2011). In feminine cultures, there is great flexibility in the roles played by men and women: a wide range of behaviours and characteristics is possible from both men and women. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Mulan* both show societies where traditional gender roles are deeply ingrained, reflecting a more masculine orientation. The female characters of both movies acted contrary to the gender norms of their respective societies, Yu Shu Lien and Jen Yu taking jobs that were unacceptable for a woman of that age as a warrior, and Mulan acting like a man to join the army. Their gestures are at once subversive yet empowering, signifying the capacity of female agency to tear apart conventional gender relations.

Yet, at the same time, such films indicate that these ruptures incur their sets of costs. In line with *Mulan*, there is discomfort and pain in Yu Shu Lien's and Jen Yu's ordeals in having to question and then transcend the masculine cultural assumptions made of them. In fact, both films show that, within the more masculine contexts, women's agency is contested due to an upgrowing tension between personal freedom and social conformism. The rigidly hierarchal and gender-role-bound depiction of the imperial court in *The Last Emperor* serves as a metaphor for more masculine cultural values. These, in turn, are set against the incursions of Western individualism, which proclaims values putatively more typical of the feminine: an emphasis on personal autonomy and self-expression. The negotiations by Wanrong and Wenxiu of values in conflict dramatize the complications inherent in claims of female agency within contexts where the reevaluation and reconstitution of traditional gender roles are very much open to negotiation.

6.3. Implications for Understanding Gender Roles in Eastern and Western Contexts

This comparison of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Mulan*, and *The Last Emperor* brings a valued understanding of how female agency is moulded by cultural values and gender dynamics. While women face significant hurdles to reaching autonomy in both Eastern and Western societies, they fight these in a resilient and resourceful manner. In Eastern contexts, the female agency would be multiply linked with the common good of the community, appropriate behaviour thus dictates that women act in service to the family and larger society, influenced by Confucian values (Rosenlee, 2012). Yet, the films also show how women might resist such constrictions in a bid for their autonomy in manners both revolutionary and subversive. The female agency described in these films seems to argue, however, that even as cultural values place limitations on the scope of women's autonomy, they at the same time set up a structure within which women can maneuver and redefine their positions.

Operating within the context of Western societies, where individualism and feminism have stronger impacts on gender relations, female agency operates largely as an act of resistance against the patriarchal structure. On the other hand, the films also bring into sharp focus how much agency can never be assumed except with tension and contradiction, not the least because this agency involves the negotiation of often competitive demands of tradition and modernity. Thus, by embracing the association of Eastern and Western values in *The Last Emperor*, an assertion of female agency within a rapidly changing society is fraught with complications while cultural values are in flux, and gender roles are being renegotiated. Some of the useful insights into such dynamics could be made through some of the cultural dimensions by Hofstede, such as individualism versus collectivism and masculinity versus femininity. Such dimensions point toward what ways cultural values influence female agency in portrayal, while at the same time indicating broader cultural forces that shape gender roles in cinema.

7. Conclusion

This paper examines female agency in films like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Mulan*, and *The Last Emperor* against the backdrop of both Eastern and Western perspectives. Arguably, in the way each of these films negotiated such cultural values as concern gender dynamics, unravelled complex multi-dimensional nature of female agency across cultures may be considered. While female agency in the cinematic traditions of the East, informed as they are by Confucian ideals, is presented as being constantly hampered by the cultural expectations of duty, social harmony, and respect for hierarchy, films like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Mulan* present strong images of women fighting against these chains to stake a claim of independence that is both radical and subversive. These representations indicate that even as the prescriptions of cultural values constrain female agency, they simultaneously afford women room to maneuver and new roles in ways that are not at variance with their individualistic or collective values. The *Last Emperor* offers a much more complicated suggestion of female agency vis-a-vis the interest of East-West cultural values. Empress Wanrong and Wenxiu are two women characters that still have a part to play in the taut relationship between tradition and modernity in the fast-shifting cultural topography of early 20th-century China. The film hints that even while the influence of Western ideas may open new opportunities for female empowerment, these are fraught with tension and contradiction in the light of competing demands of tradition and modernity.

Application of some of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, especially individualism versus collectivism and masculinity versus femininity, has been very useful in framing such dynamics. In the case of collectivist cultures, female agency relates to the collective good, while in individualistic cultures, female agency pertains more to the personal independence of a woman. These films thus reflect these values through a constant problematization of the portrayal of gender roles and agency, a rich and nuanced exploration of how women navigate cultural constraints in assertions of their independence. In conclusion, this present study has highlighted the relevance of a cultural context within which portrayals of female agency take centre stage in films. The paper has added to the general discussion of how gendered roles are represented within *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Mulan*, and *The Last Emperor*, demonstrating how cultural values enable and disable female autonomy. Further research into more films and broader cultural contexts will help the contemporary female condition in cinema become even clearer by pointing out how women exert their agency in a fast-changing world.

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