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The “Wink” of Male Gaze in East and West Women Figures of Motherhood in Medieval Europe and Chinese Civilization

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“Male Gaze” was first mentioned by Laura Mulvey in 1975 which refers to the notion that films are constructed from and for the perspective of a male heterosexual viewer such that women are constantly displayed as objects for men’s gaze rather than as independent entities whose value is distinct from how they are viewed by men. In Michel Foucault’s work *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault further interpreted that “the gaze” is a kind of power abuse from superior to inferior.¹ Thus, Foucault’s answer is the male gaze is one of the power abuses from male to female, or more specifically, from patriarchal society to women.²

In modern film industry, celebrities always referred as the model of gender characteristics. People considered celebrities as the model of gender role as these celebrities are the cultural symbol and recognition in the entire society.³ However, the tradition of “celebrities” is long-enduring – women figures in history were well-known for their outstanding virtue and femininity. However, I would argue that these “celebrities” – the women figures were the result of *subconscious social recognition* which constructed by male gaze according to Foucault’s theory.⁴ In this paper, I would examine “how” and “why” male gaze constructed women figures by using two famous women figure – Mencius’s mother in China and Virgin Mary in Medieval Europe, two exemplary figures representing *motherhood* in long-lasting patriarchal civilizations.

Motherhood is dominant in patriarchal societies, especially for agricultural-based civilizations like China and Europe which consider motherhood as the representation of “production” and “harvesting.” However, these meanings stepped beyond as civilizations evolved. The alternation of the meaning of motherhood – which is the focus of male gaze, depends on the needs of society, including social structure and its values.

In Medieval Europe, the worship of Virgin Mary began in 431CE.⁵ This worship was first a comparative figure against Eve, who seduced Adam to eat the Forbidden Fruit which lead the humankind suffered from Original Sin. The Mary-Eve dichotomy was based on the tendency to categorize women in to two polar in moral perspective.⁶ Virgin Mary’s virginity was considered as “holiness” and “loyalty” which the men required women to behave in agricultural-based patriarchal society; while Eve was the figure of sinful and misbehaved women. In Medieval period, motherhood switched to the representation of virtue and moral education rather than production. This can be attributed to paternal uncertainty during the Early Middle Ages – when morality deteriorated and underdevelopment of culture, which the necessity of “idolatry” resurged as the method of maintaining social ethics.⁷ Therefore, the Church – which

dominated the Medieval society, constructed women figure with perfect virtue and morality which should be deified as an unquestionable authority. The mother of God, became the best choice in social and religious considerations. As the power of the Church enhanced in Medieval Europe, Virgin Mary had become the women model which constructed by patriarchal society through deification by the powerful Church, that the Virginitude of Virgin Mary is unchallengeable and unquestionable.⁸

Far before the beginning of Medieval Europe, Mencius's Mother (Mother Meng) had already become one of the exemplary figures in Han China. *The Biographies of Exemplary Women (Lienü Zhuan)* written by Liu Xiang was the first Confucian text considered Mother Meng as one of the matronly models since Han Dynasty.⁹ Unlike Medieval Europe, which setting up deified women figure for requesting women to behave as Virgin Mary in order to release women's "sin" due to evilness of Eve. Instead, Chinese civilization considers women take care of domestic affairs is the highest virtue – for production, children caring and even education to their next generations. In Song Dynasty, benefited from Neo-Confucianism, Mencius became the second most important figure in Confucianism.¹⁰ Mother Meng, who also benefited from the rise of Mencius's position, became the only mother model in *Three Character Classic (Sanzijing)* hereafter. Her two famous story – moving houses for three times, and cutting off her weaving have become the examples of children education ever since.

Although these women figure were social symbols which recognized by the society, the subconsciousness of the recognition was constructed during the process of decision-making by the dominating classes in patriarchal society – the scholar-officials in China and the church in Medieval Europe. Although women enjoyed political participation in Medieval Europe, the sources of power came from the men – the feudal lord, the king or the church.¹¹ While in China, political participation of women was strictly forbidden, the empress dowagers could only take part in the process of decision-making under extreme conditions.¹² Therefore, the social structure and political formation was under men's control, while women were recipients and executors of the social norms that designed by men. However, women's self-awareness of their own gender role and responsibilities were not unidirectionally from enforcement of patriarchy system. Instead, willingness of behaving as idealized women figure given by men was attributed to the result of self-cognition constituted by women's self-materialization under the influence of male gaze. As Jacques Lacan's theory of gaze, the "gaze" is a *mirror* of men's materialization towards women, and women willing to perform the characteristics of femininity expected by patriarchy.¹³ *Motherhood* was

the paramount feminine characteristics in Medieval Europe and China – as these patriarchal agricultural-based civilizations required stable domestic production, which requires women to stay in the interior of social eco-system (the micro-mesosystem)^{14, 15}

The application of male gaze through women figures in both Medieval Europe and Chinese civilization were similar. Since the majority in the society were illiterate, art became the approach of projecting the idea of motherhood – the main feature of male gaze from singly classics towards the public.

“Madonna and Child” was a popular theme of visual art in Medieval Europe. It was a common Christian iconography since the Byzantine Empire, depicting Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus. In the Early Medieval period, Madonna and Child had already spread across Eastern Europe, while in the early art works Virgin Mary showed a limited degree of motherhood – unnatural gesture, stiff and rigid facial expression gave a solemn, dignified Virgin Mary representing holiness and prestige of the church, as most of the iconographies such as *the Golden Madonna of Essen* in 980 were served for decorating altars in churches and cathedrals.¹⁶ As time gone by, under the gradual influences of Carolingian Renaissance, the Medieval people started to concern certain important topics such as humanism – the emancipation of individuals and personal feelings, thus the image of Virgin Mary in Madonna and Child enriched with vividness of motherhood. *In Rest on The Flight into Egypt* (1510) by Gerard David and *Madonna del Granduca* (1505) by Raphael were two exemplary showcase of Virgin Mary’s motherhood and femininity – Virgin Mary carries Baby Jesus, showing realistic facial expressions through her gentle gaze towards Baby Jesus, giving an affective, tender mother image in the public.¹⁷

The betterment and flourishing of Madonna and Child were actually, an indirect control of women through art representation reflected by men. The first reason is the creator of art works related to Madonna and Child were most likely men.¹⁸ As art is a mirror of the artists’ mind, Madonna and Child is men’s reflection of the pursue of ideal women – which Virgin Mary is the highest and most deified figure to all women.¹⁹ Therefore, the clearer figure of Virgin Mary in Madonna and Child, the more restricted frame was created for women – that Virgin Mary is the paragon of morality for women, who was blessed by the God to carry Jesus Christ to be the Messiah for mortals.²⁰ This means that Virgin Mary’s maternity and representation of motherhood were based on her virtuousness, moral standard and holiness *given* by God. The final goal for women was to behave as virtuous and righteous as Virgin Mary – the figure constructed by men through a demonstration in Madonna and Child. In reward, women could also become

saints in Medieval Europe – to proof that they were also blessed by God in the age of women depreciation assigned by patriarchal authority.²¹

In atheistic Chinese civilization, motherhood was defined differently. Unlike Jesus, who born to be transcending, intelligent and extraordinary, Mencius, who was simply a “problem child” in modern perspective. The story of how Mother Meng deals with this problem child was clearly recorded in *Lienü Zhuan* and *Sanzijing*. Based on the classics, Kang Tao, a scholar-painter in Qing Dynasty, painted the story of Mother Meng and Mencius on silk. According to *Lienü Zhuan* and *Sanzijing*, Mother Meng cut off her weaving and reprimanded Mencius when he said he learnt nothing from school, and relocated houses for three times to find a suitable place for Mencius’s learning. Kang depicted the former in a scene, focusing on Mother Meng’s facial expression – a stern, dour mother who seriously educating her son with a worry of Mencius’s future. Kang also mentioned the latter by calligraphy in the same artwork.²² The theme of Mothers’ children-educating (Kezi-Tu, 課子圖) was a fever during Ming-Qing period, when civil examination became the main way for raising social mobility for family. Therefore, the emphasis of “family tradition” (Jia-feng) through education became the pivotal elements for equipping their children in order to become government officials through civil examination. In other classical vernacular Chinese novel, *The Scholars (Rulin waishi)*, mothers always motivate their sons to attempt civil examination in order to “honor the ancestors.”²³ While the responsibility of mothers in Chinese civilization is to educate her son and provide the best learning environment like Mother Meng.

Rather than a gift of God, motherhood is a process of nurturing in Chinese civilization. The meaning of motherhood was given and interpreted by patriarchal society based on the need of the society itself. In the case of Chinese civilization, filial piety and loyalty were the main criteria of selecting government officials in Han Dynasty. From Song to Qing, civil examination continued the emphasis of these criteria by the selection of exam materials – the *Four Books* and *Five Classics*. These Confucius classics educate the students about “Five Relations” – the notion about relationships and obey, in order to maintain social stability.²⁴ Therefore, motherhood in China was not simply a responsibility of children education but a *maintenance* of relationships under collectivist society. Mother Meng is the paragon of mother figure under this definition of motherhood because her son, Mencius, becomes one of the most influential Chinese thinkers across Chinese civilization and even nowadays. In most of the Ming-Qing vernacular novels, the images of “Good Mother” were standardized as same as the image of Mother Meng – gentle, graceful but serious and stern. Even Dream

of the Read Chamber, which considered as “anti-patriarchal novel,” some characters still influenced by the image of Mother Meng which constructed and propagated by the patriarchal authority, such as Li Wan, who pleased to act as what Mother Meng did.²⁵

The differences revealed when we combined both the classics and visual arts together. *Pietà* (1498) by Michelangelo is the most remarkable artwork of Virgin Mary, which showed an uncommon youthful Mary at the time of the Passion of Christ, the body of Jesus of the lap of Virgin Mary after Crucifixion. The sculpture focuses on the incarnation of the intimacy of mother and son by crafting a sorrowful, worrying and merciful facial expression of Virgin Mary, who found her son died on her hands. The contradiction of the corpse of Jesus and Virgin Mary is the contrast of live and death – mother brings life, while the life she gave – died on her hands. Therefore, Virgin Mary closed her eyes and her hands are raised in prayer, to pray for miracles in desperate. This showed a coalesce with Aquinas’s view towards Virgin Mary “she was so full of graceful that it overflows on to all mankind and suffices for the salvation of the world.”²⁶ Aquinas further eulogized Virgin Mary’s faithfulness, tenderness and mercy by writing a poem.²⁷ Therefore, motherhood presented by Michelangelo is the emphasis on virtue and meaning of mothers – it is an in-depth exploration of the spiritual meaning of mother in theological favor – mother is the beginning of all creations; thus, a mother should be merciful and caring to all the livings. And the image of youthful Mary, is a symbol of holiness.²⁸

The image of Mother Meng is more secular – a mother image which paid more attention on practices instead of doctrines and faith. In Kang Tao’s silk painting, Mother Meng’s serious facial expression contracted with young Mencius’s respectfulness, showing a mother-son-subordinate relationship. As *Analects for Women* stated, “the authority to instruct them rests solely with the mother,” after women are able to “Establish Oneself as a Person” as the model for their children.²⁹ In this case, Kang Tao, as a traditional scholar-painter who received Confucian educations, projected the ideas from *Analects for Women* in his artwork. The creation of Mother Meng’s image in Kang Tao’s painting follows what the classics mentioned for exemplary mother – an autoreactive woman who educating her son by taking actions. Like Mother Meng, cutting off her weaving and condemn Mencius seriously, no matter it may affects the livelihood of the family, educating sons is the primary responsibility of mother in Chinese civilization. It maybe radical, but in Chinese civilization, taking actions by using mother herself as the embodiment of virtues is a must, otherwise, it has no different with raising rats and pigs.³⁰ Therefore, mother figure in China shows a

tendency of practical moral education in secular perspective, emphasizing women's virtue should be *applied* into children education by materializing herself as the model of virtue. In contrast, mother figure in Medieval Europe is a *manifestation* of purity and holiness. Since mother was considered as the life giver to creations in Christian classics, the image of Virgin Mary tended to show the greatness of motherhood due to the mercy to all creation. Therefore, Virgin Mary answers “what” is the “greatness of motherhood,” while Mother Meng explained “how” to become a successful mother instead.

As a conclusion, the patriarchal authorities projecting male gazes indirectly towards women by constructing figures of motherhood is visible. However, the meaning motherhood – or conversely, responsibility of women as a mother, were different based on the formation and situation of the civilizations themselves. In Medieval Europe, virtuousness and holiness were the most important criteria while the Chinese civilization emphasized on children caring and education. These attributed to the Churches' control and civil examination respectively – the requirement of the authorities. By constructing maternal figures through arts, classics and vernacular literatures, the notion of “perfect model of mothers” embedded into women's mind. As a result, women tried to perform and fulfill patriarchal expectations to proof their “value” – by materializing themselves as one of the models of femininity – an incarnation of male gaze based on the theory of Foucault and Lacan.

However, there were slightly different to the definitions of gaze – it is not an *enforcement* from superiors to inferiors – Figures of motherhood were constructed by *culture* instead of political enforcement.³¹ The application of the gaze was indirect in the society, while women as the recipients were willing and honored to become the idealized women figure constructed by men. In Medieval Europe, women could become saints as the reward of exemplary virtuousness under the agreement of Church. It is a reward-or-punish relationship – become saints or burnt alive as a witch; in Chinese civilization, it is a responsibility to raise up their children, and in return, the sons have the responsibility of honoring their parents through the success in civil examination, it is a responsibility-related issue rather than a reward.

As a result, women figure of motherhood is not a hundred-percent of male gaze, but it shows a certain of characteristics of male gaze on women – materialization of women and the influence of women's self-recognition. Therefore, the establishment of women figure by patriarchal society is a “wink” towards women – if you do your best, you will be intoxicated into it, but remember the eyes of men – the patriarchal society – were still watching you.

Notes

¹ Michel, Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), pp.170-172.

² Instead of using biological binary distinguishing between female and male, I would prefer to use the term “women” and men” to represent social and cultural recognition and self-identification on this topic – as “male gaze” is a socio-cultural issue.

³ Laura, Mulvey. *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989, pp.833-844.

⁴ Foucault considered “gaze” is an enforcement from superior to inferior. In this case, women figures are not belonged to such kind of enforcement, rather, it is an oblique gaze which monitors women’s behavior. Thus, I would call the male gaze applied in women figures as “subconscious.” See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 104-134.

⁵ The title *Theotokos* (Mother of Jesus in Greek) was first be used by Athanasius of Alexander in 300. In 431CE, the Council of Ephesus decreed Virgin Mary as *Theotokos* because Jesus is both God and man, this was the first official recognition of Virgin Mary in Christianity. Virgin Mary became the most important women figure in Catholicism and Orthodoxies hereafter. See Raymond L. Burke et al., *Mariology: A Guide for Priests, Deacons, Seminarians and Consecrated Persons* (Goleta, CA: Queenship Pub, 2008), pp.178.

⁶ Vladimir Tumanoy, “Mary Versus Eve: Paternal Uncertainty and the Christian View of Women,” *Neophilologus*, 95, no. 4 (2011), pp. 507-521.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Thomas Aquinas explained the questions of Virgin Mary’s virginity by using dialectical method. However, the rationale of Aquinas’s argument based on the *Five Proofs*. It presumed god’s existence, omnipotence and omnibenevolence, which emphasized the importance of faith during the process of thinking. See Thomas, Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Ohio: Christian Classics Eternal Library, 2005), pp. 3052-3084.

⁹ The first historical record about Mencius Mother should be Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian*. However, the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* is the first Chinese text which considers Mencius Mother as a women model.

¹⁰ In 1190, Zhu Xi gathered *The Book of Mencius*, together with *The Great Learning*, *Analects of Confucius* and *Doctrine of Mean* as *The Four Books*. Mencius was considered as the secondary master of Confucianism hereafter. See Lianke Yan and Carlos Rojas, trans., *The Four Books* (London: Vintage, 2016), pp.1-4.

¹¹ In Middle Ages, women could become feudal lords, but as same as other feudal lords, the power was given by the kings and pope based on special political consideration. In general, this was the norm of Medieval feudal system, but this shows the power was in the hand of patriarchal society, and most likely, from the Church. Therefore, women enjoyed a very limited right of political participation in Medieval Europe. See Eleanor Parker, “Beyond the Warrior Queen,” *History Today* 68, no. 9 (2018), pp.106.

¹² Empress dowagers could only participate the royal court when the previous emperor died early while the inheritor was not able to make decision due to young age or disabilities.

¹³ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979) pp.211.

¹⁴ According to Social Ecological model, starting from individual (including sex, age and health), microsystem refers to family, peers and church, neighborhood was included in mesosystem. These

categories were classified as the internal part of the social ecosystem, which the more exterior part such as social attitudes and ideologies of the culture were out of women's control. See Urie Bronfenbrenner, *Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Taking China as an example, Mencius stated that men should "support their wives and children." This has shown that men were responsible for exterior activities such as farming and warfare, while women relied on the 'support' for men at home. See Irene Bloom, trans., *Mencius*, Translation from the Asian Classics (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 219.

¹⁶ Umberto Eco. *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 14.

¹⁸ There were some female painters who painted Madonna and Child, such as Saint Catherine of Bologna. While compare with other masters such as Michelangelo, Duccio and da Vinci, female painters were much less famous as male painters in Medieval Europe – at least in terms of the artworks related to Madonna and Child.

¹⁹ Maria Ruvoldt, *The Italian Renaissance Imagery of Inspiration: Metaphors of Sex, Sleep and Dreams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 114-118.

²⁰ In the Gospel of Luke (1:26-38), The angel (Gabriel) went to her (Virgin Mary) and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you... the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

²¹ In Council of Tours in 567 CE, the church considered women as "snakes," to be free from the sin of Eve, women had to be virtuous mothers as Virgin Mary. See Dorothy R. Pape, *In Search of God's Ideal Woman: A Personal Examination of the New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1976), pp.62-80.

²² Ping Yu, "An Analysis of Kang Tao's 'Mother Meng Educating Mencius By Cutting Off Her Weaving'," *Education Journal for Senior Citizens* 9, no.9 (September 2017): 30-31.

²³ Yong Liu, "Mother Image in Rulin Waishi," *Industrial & Science Tribune* 11, no.17 (2012): 206.

²⁴ The promotion of social mobility through civil examination was effective in the eyes of Matteo Ricci who considered China under civil examination was "worldly known as its people are polite and abide by codes of conduct... people never think about overthrowing their ruler." See Hong Chen, "On Matteo Ricci's Interpretations of Chinese Culture," *Coolabah*, no.16 (2015): 87-100.

²⁵ Li Wan is a widow and elder sister-in-law of Jia Baoyu. Her husband died in her age of fourteen to sixteen. She brought up her son, Jia Lan to attempt the civil examination and finally becomes a government official when the Jia Clan had already declined. Although the last 40 chapters were not written by Cao Xueqin, Li Wan is the few of the characters who have a good ending in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, confirmed by her own prophetic poem in chapter five. Therefore, Li Wan is the example of the "good ending" of motherhood in China, whose educate her son and be honored by the success of son, and the most important, women were "willing" to become the standardized mother assigned by men.

²⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, pp. 3515-3516.

²⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 3629-3642.

²⁸ Some explanation suggested that the youthful image of Virgin Mary symbolizes her incorruptible purity, as Michelangelo mentioned, "Do you not know that women stay fresh more than those who are not chaste?" See John Wyndham Pope-Hennessy, *An Introduction to Italian Sculpture. Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture*, 3rd ed. (London: Phaidon Press, 1970), pp.304.

²⁹ Ruozhao Song, *Analects for Women* (New York: Columbia University (Asia for Educators)), pp. 3-5.

³⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 6.

³¹ It is arguable that civil examination is a political enforcement. However, I would prefer to say it is also a cultural influence because civil examination is only effective in this case because of the Classics of Confucianism rather than the system itself – even though raising social classes is a dream for everyone, Confucianism considers more on honoring their own clan/family through examination, stated in their doctrine – “make our name famous in future ages and thereby glorify our parents, this is the end of filial piety. See James Legge, trans., *Hsiao King or Classic of Filial Piety* (Montana: Kessing Publishing, 2010), pp. 6-7.

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