

**“I Revolt, Therefore We Are to Come”:
Imaginary M/Other in
The Assassin and *The Grandmaster***

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Abstract

This study puts forward a critical investigation of two chivalrous swordswomen, Nie Yinniang in *The Assassin* (2015) and Gong Er in *The Grandmaster* (2013), applying Julia Kristeva’s writing on “intimate revolt,” a psychoanalytic concept that deals with a revival of inner psychic experience based on timelessness. In the triadic relationship of female subjectivity among the self, mother, and imaginary father, the characters constantly question themselves while facing life-and-death dilemmas. Their self-questioning reinvents heterogeneous visual images of the maternal to create the strengthened vitality of female empowerment. Yinniang’s “multiple maternal identity” disorder is tinged with Asperger’s syndrome, but the spell of difficult verbal communication is eventually broken through her inner probing of the archaic past that triggers a renewal of her psychic life. Lacking access to maternal care, Wong Kar-wai’s Gong Er identifies with the imaginary father. Coupled with her father Gong Baosen and his successor Ip Man, she doubles herself as a father-mother conglomerate and reclaims her father’s name. Whereas Yinniang’s external-and-internal transformation silently redirects energy from external maternal figures that are reborn from the interior, Gong Er’s internal-and-external maternal eroticism is reproduced from the inside to contend with the paternal hegemony. They both, however, retrieve the forgotten zone of the body in lost time to find their future recalled by the imaginary father/other. Finding an archaic inner world of the mother and searching for a future imaginary father shape retrospective temporality and future expectation to create a female heritage.

Keywords

intimate revolt, the maternal, imaginary father, pre-oedipal, archaic, future, temporality

In Julia Kristeva's critical repertoire, "intimate revolt" has emerged as an empowering concept. Referring not only to an exterior rebellion against political authority, intimate revolt is also a revival of inner psychic experience dealing with contemporary configurations of social, cultural, and philosophical issues. In *Revolt, She Said*, Kristeva explains, "[p]eople have reduced, castrated and mutilated the concept of revolt by turning it only into politics" (99). Her lesser emphasis on the political implications of "revolt" urges us to venture into etymology in order to release it from the conventional understanding. In *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, she expounds on the Latin roots of the term, namely *volvere* as well as *volta* and *voltare*: the former suggests the meanings of "turn and return"; the latter two words produce derivatives with the idea of "circular movement and, by extension, temporal return" (1-2). In her latest article, "New Forms of Revolt" (2014), Kristeva articulates intimate revolt as an inner experience linked with temporality, "an inner experience that is demanding, unique, and able to appropriate the complexity of the past in order to approach the present and the future" (2). Instead of attending to the working out of revolt at its wider exterior political status, Kristeva's writing takes an inward turn that investigates her concerns with psychological symptoms within the individual mind that transcend a timeframe. In this paper, the concept of intimate revolt is analyzed in two contemporary films *Cike Nie Yinniàng* 刺客聶隱娘 (*The Assassin*, 2015) directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien (侯孝賢) and *Yidai zongshi* 一代宗師 (*The Grandmaster*, 2013) directed by Wong Kar-wai (王家衛), with a focus on female psychology and its association with the nostalgia of temporal return.

Temporality of Revolt

Intimate revolt, a kind of inner questioning, arises in resistance to the civilized obligations and conventions to underwrite the possibility of overturning the clichéd. The core of revolt, thus, is connected to a notion of temporality embedded in a past, and simultaneously, with a future. The maternal body to which Kristeva urges us to return is more than just a pre-oedipal alliance with mother. It is also an on-going process of moving, displacing, and renewing, both drives constituting the profound logic of maternal revolt. The future, if it exists, allows for a new beginning and rebirth that depends on a deeper nostalgia for maternal eroticism. Kristeva's reflection on a specific maternal eroticism that she terms "reliance" is to be considered in the light of enigmatic primal repression that could be traced back to the pre-oedipal phase, a primary affective disposition embedded with meaningful

signs, where the self is united with the mother.¹ Similarly, the concept of intimate revolt connects the self in its search for an indefinite and questioning self-relation, a renewed link with the mother and with the imaginary father that is a revision of Sigmund Freud's "father of individual prehistory." The reincarnation of eternal regression in the pre-oedipal period shows a ternary relationship structure in the family romance, which can be roughly divided into the following three parts: the original self-narcissistic bond between self and mother, the mother's absence that forces the self's subjectivity to emerge, and the entry to the symbolic order that occurs when we accept an imaginary father.

In a family romance structure set against a political background, *The Assassin* portrays the female lead Nie Yinniang (聶隱娘, played by Shu Qi [舒淇]) in her struggle to choose between two competing political forces in the chaotic era of ninth century late Tang Dynasty when the powerful Weibo (魏博) military province sustained an unstable and tense relationship with the Imperial Tang Court. In this martial arts epic, based on a Tang Dynasty short story, Yinniang, a female warrior for the Tang Court, is sent by her master, Princess-nun Jiacheng (嘉誠公主, played by Sheu Fang-yi [許芳宜]), who is both a princess and a nun, to kill the military governor of Weibo, Tian Ji'an (田季安, played by Chang Chen [張震]), to whom she has been betrothed. But soon the engagement is broken off when Ji'an's parents find a better political marriage for their son. It is significant that Nie Yinniang, the name that profoundly describes her independent spirit inspired and rejected by the maternal figure in the original short story, is employed in the *Assassin* film adaptation.

Altogether, there are six maternal characters in the film, namely Princess Jiacheng (嘉誠公主, also played by Sheu Fang-yi [許芳宜]), Princess-nun Jiacheng, Lady Nie Tian (聶田氏, played by Yong Mei [咏梅]), Lady Tian Yuan (田元氏, played by Zhou Yun [周韻]), Concubine Hu Ji (瑚姬, played by Nikki Hsin-Ying Hsieh [謝欣穎]), and Nie Yinniang. Each has her own value and moral philosophy and represents different kinds of femininity. Several of these maternal characters are arranged to display a twin motif as in the case of the twin princesses who, although they both create, do so in opposing fashion. Jiacheng creates positivity and nostalgia while Jiacheng is negative and destructive. Paralleling these two princesses is a similar contrast in the personalities of Concubine Hu Ji and Lady Tian Yuan, the former a tender, pregnant maternal figure, the latter revealing her role as assassin when Yinniang uncovers her mask following their duel. Like her mother Lady Nie Tian, Yinniang plays the role of one who serves both princesses, one having been

¹ See Kristeva, "Reliance, or Maternal Eroticism."

her ex-mother-in-law, the other her kungfu master. Those three pairs of maternal figures are arranged to tell the film's different female stories, yet only Yinniang is successful because her psychic space is supported by transference to a loving maternal figure that in turn contributes to a pre-oedipal, tender father, Nie Feng and the character of the mirror-polisher, intuited in the imagination through "otherness."

Whereas *The Assassin* intensively concentrates more on the mother as other, *The Grandmaster* unveils a different method to detail the potential support from the imaginary other/father. At a critical time, women have to undergo the extreme experience of the maternal other, as well as the imagination of the father, both of which constitute the two major parts of intimate revolt in temporality. The fantasy of a father-mother conglomerate, based on Kristeva, is a primary identification with "the very space where father and mother meet . . . a space of fundamental unrepresentability toward which all glances nonetheless converge; a primal scene where genitality dissolves sexual identification beyond their given difference" (*Desire* 249). We could conclude that the imaginary father is the tender "other" who crosses the space of mother and self, letting the self realize another space that can be traversed in order to enter upon a new journey.

In contrast to the foregoing protagonist of *The Assassin*, Gong Er (宮二, played by Zhang Ziyi [章子怡]) in *The Grandmaster* is her own semiotic originator without any maternal figure's support. Born in a martial arts family, she is not allowed to take up the mantle from her father Gong Baosen (宮寶森, played by Wang Qingxiang [王慶祥]), a leader who has integrated *Xingyi quan* (形意拳)² and *Bagua zhang* (八卦掌),³ to make the movements fit his daughter's gender. Ip Man (葉問, played by Tony Leung Chiu-wai [梁朝偉]) is the chosen male approved by her father to pass on his martial arts tradition. What she expects from him is the chivalrous spirit. However, she faces several challenges. The first dilemma she faces is the problematic gender doctrine adhered to by people from the world of martial arts. A female is not allowed to be a leader, nor can an engaged woman consider herself qualified to take revenge on Ma San (馬三, played by

² *Xingyi quan* (形意拳), literally translated as "Form-intentioned fist" or "Shaped-to-will fist," is characterized by aggressive linear movements filled with energy to overwhelm the rival. However, its assembling power gathered from linear actions seems efficiently to enclose tight spirals and circles within the direct footwork.

³ *Bagua zhang* (八卦掌), literally translated as "Eight Trigrams palm," refers to the trigrams of the *I Ching* 易經 (*Book of Changes*), one of the canons of Taoism. It is a boxing technique based on the transformation of the palm of the hand and the movement of the feet. In *The Grandmaster*, Gong Baosen is a martial arts master who combines these characteristics of *Xingyi quan* and *Bagua zhang* into one school of martial arts.

Zhang Jin [張晉]), who has killed her father Gong Baosen. The second predicament derives from her secret love for and emotional worship of Ip Man.

These two predicaments are intermingled to create an inner conflict that eventually becomes the core of her rebellious femininity based on the issue of “to kill or not to kill.” She chooses to embark on a different path from contemporary women when, disapproving of the male-dominated social norms, she repudiates the marriage contract to avenge her father. Reestablishing the family name, she goes beyond the doctrine of male apprenticeship and becomes a remodeled female grandmaster loyal to her authentic self with a requited love toward Ip Man. Her maternal future is, surprisingly, reinvigorated through a strong attachment to the imaginary father imageries of hair ashes and spirit tablet. To resolve the dissonance between the archaic mother and the imaginary father is also a major dilemma for Yinniang. If she abides by the symbolic law and kills Tian Ji’an, the power of the Tang Dynasty would be restored, thereby pleasing her master. Not killing him, on the contrary, would meet the requisite need of maternal reliance, to use Kristeva’s terms. These opposing ideas are conveyed by ambivalent imageries of a pair of jade ornaments and bluebird-and-mirror that accompany her to enter into an archaic past marked by potential change, rebirth, and a realizable future.

In the ensuing discussion, this study puts forward a critical investigation of the female sexuality of these two leaders of revolt, Yinniang in *The Assassin* and Gong Er in *The Grandmaster*, applying Kristeva’s psychoanalytic writing on intimate revolt and its link with the nostalgia of temporal-return. Analyzing the permanent returns of the archaic mother and imaginary father maps a route of temporality that constitutes a self-breakthrough of the female generation. Based on such inevitable questioning of the self, heterogeneous visual images of the feminine and maternal are thus reinvented to create the strengthened vitality of female empowerment. The first figure in revolt is Yinniang whose strong narcissistic bond with her mother and the twin princesses is an essential connection to explore the roles of semiotic m/other. Director Hou Hsiao-hsien deploys the minimalistic style of language and poetic visual images to lead the audience to the inner part of Yinniang’s world that is ego-centered and tinged with aphasia, a symptom of Asperger’s syndrome.⁴ The spell of verbal difficulty in communicating with others is eventually broken. However, through the constant inner probing, it triggers the renewal of her psychic life. The original inspiration for the second figure in revolt, Wang Kar-wai’s Gong Er, derives from the famous women of Chinese history in the 1950s. Like the goddess Athena who sprang full grown and clad in armor from

⁴ See Yang, Hou, and Xie.

Zeus's forehead, Gong Er identifies with the imaginary father, who, paired with her father and his successor Ip Man, doubles as a father-mother conglomerate who has inherited not only feminine tenderness but also masculine perseverance. Equal to or more powerful than the male counterparts, she reclaims energy to generate a maternal genealogy by creating a female history in opposition to the fraternal hegemony. Her vow of vengeance for her father's death becomes a life-time mission undertaken at the cost of marriage, childbearing, and preaching. Even so, she takes the challenge head-on, transforming herself into a chivalrous woman with an internalized mother-father spirit.

Yinniāng's "multiple maternal identity" disorder leads to "emotional containment" (Lupke 220) and psychological "aphasia," both symptoms of Asperger's syndrome; Gong Er is detached from the mother, causing her femininity/motherhood to degenerate. However, both of the heroines are rejuvenated through the "imaginary father." At a crucial point, faced with criticism from her wounded father Nie Feng (聶鋒, played by Ni Dahong [倪大紅]), Yinniāng is saved from a nightmarish spell of aphasia once she removes the mask of the killer and embraces love from the mirror-polisher (played by Satoshi Tsumabuki [妻夫木聰]). As for Gong Er, she internalizes the spirit of her father Gong Baosen when he passes away and bonds with Ip Man. She can be said to be nourished by an abstract notion of the imaginary father as she summons up the energy to avenge her father's death on Ma San.

Whereas Yinniāng's external-and-internal transformation silently redirects energy from the maternal figures within and is reborn from it, Gong Er's internal-and-external maternal eroticism is exclusively reproduced from the inside without any support from maternal figures to contend with the paternal hegemony. Eventually the two heroines become maternal role models of Kristevan intimate revolt, via the symbols of a pair of jade ornaments, a bluebird-and-a-mirror, a spirit tablet, and hair ashes, positing their temporal function on the internal logic of rebellious femininity.

Return of the Archaic

Timelessness has been incorporated and reinterpreted by Kristeva, who provides a handful of inferences to indicate that the temporality of revolt is a gendered construct in the family romance. In her investigation of Freudian psychoanalysis, Kristeva identifies two occurrences of revolt embedded with gender connotations: "oedipal revolt" and "archaic revolt." As a primal structure for the

psyche, “oedipal revolt” concerns each subject’s desire for the mother coupled with censorship forbidding such a desire. As Kristeva says, “the Oedipus complex and the incest taboo organize the psyche of the speaking being” (*Sense* 12). Kristeva opines that the second occurrence of “archaic revolt” is more important to “overturn conscious meaning,” and that its connection with “the impossible temporality that is timelessness” becomes a core for further exploration (*Sense* 15). She offers a new definition of “archaic revolt” that can be traced back to the maternal past. Positing her renewed definition of the association of the feminine time and space for revolt with the ability of illusion, she says, “Structurally, however, a woman is better placed than anyone to explore illusion” (*Sense* 106). Gertrude Postl helpfully explains that a sort of transgression is involved in Kristeva’s “archaic revolt,” explaining that it is “not just to play with the phallic order but to play with the illusion of the phallic order, engaging in a game of illusions without getting lost in those illusions. . . .” (154). The female proximity to illusion offers a backbone to “archaic revolt” that resides on the two planes of gender identity where bisexuality offers models of feminine subversion. The dawning of a retrospective return places revolt in the intimate inner sphere of the maternal past that highlights the possible rebirth into an open future.

Based on such an “archaic revolt” context, the setting for *The Assassin* is appropriately located in a splendid kingdom of the nostalgic past, outside history, blanketed in myth, full of imagination that possesses the airy, shimmering quality of a dream, the lost time in the unconscious. Yinniāng, the eponymous heroine, has an intricate name that is worthy of interpreting since *yin* means “hidden” or “concealed,” and *niāng* suggests a young woman who is not married but also involves the meaning of mother. Yinniāng’s hidden character resides in her difficulty in communicating verbally with others on social occasions. According to interviews with Xie Haimeng, one of the script writers, it seems that Yinniāng suffers from Asperger’s syndrome that is characterized by significant problems of social interaction and communication that could be revealed from Yinniāng having only nine lines in the film.⁵

Yinniāng consistently returns to her pre-oedipal phase, the archaic self to search for the strength of the mother from three major maternal figures: the twin princesses, Princess Jiacheng and Princess-nun Jiāxin, and her mother Lady Nie Tian who serves as a lady-in-waiting to Princess Jiacheng. One of the most powerful maternal characters is Princess Jiacheng who becomes a nostalgic figure, the unseen and unspoken past that pervades Yinniāng’s memory once she steps into

⁵ See Xie (353, 390, 392, and 394).

the home from where her parents sent her away thirteen years earlier. She seems to be a positive maternal force associated with the love of nature, and that explains why Hou amply uses natural scenery to reflect Yinning's delicate inner world. Their connection is reflected from Yinning's mother, who seems to play not just the role of the tender mother but also that of the messenger for Princess Jiacheng to remind her daughter of the past memory of the proposed marriage of political convenience. In flashbacks, in a garden where lots of peonies blossom, Princess Jiacheng plays a zither and relates a folktale about a melancholy bluebird. The exotic story is later recalled by Yinning when she finally has a chance to reveal her feeling of solitude to her father and the beloved mirror-polisher. As an exotic gift sent from a faraway country, the lonely bluebird is placed before a mirror whose reflection is mistaken to be its companion. Surprisingly, when seeing its own image reflected in the mirror, it begins to sing out all its deepest longing until its death the next morning.

In an investigation into the true value of timelessness in Yinning's memory of Princess Jiacheng, it is important to portray the culture of intimate revolt as a process of repetitive, retrospective, and introspective questioning in the psychic life in accordance with the three Freudian modalities of temporality in the analytical process, namely the memory trace, working through, and dissolution of transference. Starting from *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud explores the unconscious, the id, and the death drive in terms of the *Zeitlos*, and his former notion considers temporality as originating from the linear time of consciousness. But later Freud proposes compulsive, repetitive, and atemporal patterns that intrude into the linear system of ordinary life, subverting logical arrangements in the present living environment as one recalls the repressed past stranded in the unconscious. Kristeva explains that "Freudian temporality relies on the linear time of consciousness in order to inscribe a rift there, a breach, a frustration: this is the scandal of the timeless (*Zeitlos*)" (*Sense* 30). In *Kristeva: Threshold*, Stacey Keltner claims that "The *Zeitlos* marks the confrontation with a sensible, affective heterogeneity. Its rupture of time constitutes its scandalousness" (91). It is interesting to note that the etymological meaning of the Latin root *scandalum* is "detainment," which reveals the semantic core of Kristeva's conception of the temporality in revolt. It explains how Kristeva's interpretation of Freud's scandalous time is a "matter of detained temporality, a temporality that does not temporalize, a breach of a time that does not temporalize" (*Intimate Revolt* 31). Associated with the pleasure principle, this unbound time is a hidden mechanism of cultural resistance triggered by a repeated cycle of desire and then to death.

In “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through,” Freud discusses temporality and its link to these inter-related concepts. He believes that the mind is a continuum of activity that buries discrete memories. In an unrecognizable form, the past is attached to the past. Once the repression is revealed and clarified, the fabric of lost memory is integrated in the mind. Although Kristeva’s exploration of the temporality of revolt is rooted in Freud’s concept of the three temporalities: the memory trace, working through, and dissolution of transference, she pushes the Freudian model forward and incorporates her own reflections. The memory trace, in Kristeva, “can sometimes seep into very concealed, elaborate, and sublimatory formations and mark them with unsettling strangeness of the atemporal” (*Intimate Revolt* 35). As a reminder concealed within the unconscious, memory is an indestructible psychic trace, one that is unable to destabilize the routine in life. The working through, containing an ambivalently self-contradictory feature, “presents itself as a dead time, while in reality there is an acceptance of drives repressed by the lived experience (*Erleben*) of the transference” (*Intimate Revolt* 36). As Sarah K. Hansen and Rebecca Tuvel put it, “The indefinite questioning of revolt allows subjects to work through rather than act out psychic wounds” (7). It can then be treated as a mechanism that deals with resistance against temporality in the course of elaborating interpretations offered in its connection to the unconscious; here it also articulates the double-time signal followed by stagnation. The dissolution of transference, the third variant of the timeless, “represents but also activates the death of the other and the self ‘for real’ . . . opens me to the timeless of my drive, of the death drive, and even the inorganic” (*Intimate Revolt* 39). When it comes to the final destination in the analytical process, an analysand understands his/her position situated at the threshold of a “double” infinity. Kristeva clarifies the paradox: “this infinity is pulled between the impossible temporalizing of the drive and the openness of working-throughs to come” (*Intimate Revolt* 40). The double infinity, in Kristeva, is a coexistence of two movements of temporality: one considers an end to the analysis while the other has a sense of the “interminable” time of self-resolution.

The three modalities of temporality can be understood as a psychic paradox; that is, the atemporality hidden in the unconscious is not separated from the temporality of the conscious. Hence, the memory of Princess Jiacheng is a process of the three modalities of temporality working on Yinniang’s mind. The motif of the bluebird in the mirror suggests a metaphor of the self living in a completely desperate situation. Moreover, it connects Princess Jiacheng to Yinniang, both being solitary and confined in their own prisons who can find no company in the world.

Princess Jiacheng is to be valued as a symbol of the national mother shown by her connection to the blossoming peonies, the national flower. However, because of political factors, she is married to the Lord of Weibo in order to strengthen its relation with the Imperial Tang. She can be described as an “abject mother” under the conflict of national interests. Before her death, she requests that Yinniāng’s mother return one jade ornament piece to Yinniāng. The jade is to be an engagement token shared between Yinniāng and her son. Witnessing the jade being handed to her from her mother, Yinniāng considers herself, like the Princess, to be a victim of political marriage. With a twinge of sadness in her heart, she covers her face and cries out loud, remembering Princess Jiacheng’s words: “Seeing its shadow, the bluebird dances to its death” (Xie 389-90).

The retrospective *mise-en-scène* of Princess Jiacheng in the garden playing the zither and her expression of her loneliness as a bluebird has been so far the only exceptional widescreen scene; the other scenes have remained in a modest, square format making them resemble Chinese paintings. The film switches to a 1.85 frame for a memorial scene in Yinniāng’s imagination, then returns to 1.37 for the remainder of the film. The crucial function for such a widescreen image is to bring up a dream-like montage scenario that constitutes the past image of Princess Jiacheng reproduced in Yinniāng’s current mind, offering her a chance to work on the issue of inner transference. Peter H. Rist likewise interprets, “The stylistic decision to choose a grainy appearance and a wider frame draws our attention to these shots that are marked as the female protagonists subjective memories” (136). It is the re-signified connection of present to past; however, it is more than just a reproduction of the past. It is a past re-interpreted from the present view of Yinniāng. The interplay is treated as an account of maternity articulated in terms of temporality, from past to present, and even future. The “seeing its shadow” transference is perceived in the continuous present, and it takes on meaning retrospectively from the figure of the maternal Princess who offers the shape of political heaviness and cultural burden in Yinniāng’s mind. The progressive time and retrospective time are juxtaposed, one being a requisite for the other, to create a possible resolution in the future for her.

Therefore, the *mise-en-scène* is a renewed and reworked creation of “memory trace,” triggered by a jade ornament handed to her through her mother. The jade ornament used to be one of a pair that were originally given to Princess Jiacheng by her brother, the king, before marrying her to the Lord of Weibo. He hoped to consolidate the bond between the Tang and Weibo via a political marriage. Then Princess Jiacheng gives one piece of the jade ornament to her son and sends the

other to Yinniang based on a similar political consideration shown earlier by her brother. But she regrets doing so because of greater political interests gained from Lady Tian Yuan who eventually becomes her son's wife. As in the case of the bluebird, the jade ornament handed to her twice becomes the link between Princess Jiacheng and Yinniang. The reappearance of the jade signifies the grace of Princess Jiacheng who recalls Yinniang's tormented inner feelings.

The pair of jade ornaments, a metonymic shift from Mother/present to Princess/past, retrieves the unforgettable past beginning to undergo metamorphosis in accordance with Kristeva's "memory trace" that reveals actual present experience being added to past trauma. They are inferences to "bygone days, infused with joy and light. When she reunites with her jade piece in the film, Yinniang traces the texture of old time with her thumbs, recalling the worn sensation. The present is relative to the past, and loneliness to memory" (Choe n. pag.). Without the support revealed from the nostalgic memory of the Princess, the present for Yinniang would fall apart. The jade is thus a metaphorical condensation which embraces two ages in time and two different spaces with the infinite structure of recollection. Director Hou's emphasis on the "lost time" is similar to Kristeva's regained time, "another time, another experience where time-thought-language did not take place" (*Intimate Revolt* 57). Thus, the pair of jade ornaments recaptures memory that is given with the new visual images to the inexpressible world of Yinniang's radical experience.

Upon returning one of the jade ornaments to Tian Ji'an, Yinniang overhears him sharing a secret talk with his favorite concubine Hu Ji about Yinniang's devotion to him since childhood. Hu Ji is sympathetic, saying, "I truly feel for Yinniang." Hiding in the corner behind a beam, Yinniang is greatly moved as her grievances are removed from her heart. Later she informs Ji'an that "Hu Ji is pregnant," in one of her rare lines. Furthermore, playing a substitute maternal figure, she even protects Hu from being murdered. Yinniang's feeling of commiseration is emphasized repeatedly and could be traced back to the black-and-white preface where she is given a dagger by Princess-nun Jiaxin to kill a chief official, and yet she fails to do so in the second assignment, since the official is carrying a child in his arms. Obviously, Jiacheng's jade reveals a sense of feminine compassion that is totally opposed to the violent message revealed by Jiaxin's dagger.

Thus, the pair of jade ornaments functions through the phases of return/turning back/displacement/change to constitute the internal logic of rebellious femininity shared among mothers. Kristeva's probing of intimate revolt thus offers a temporal analysis, dovetailing the inquiry and displacement of the past and its turn to the future:

Revolt, then, as *return/turning back/displacement/change*, constitutes the profound logic of a certain culture that one would like to revive here and whose acuity seems quite threatened these days. What makes sense today is not the future . . . but revolt: that is *the questioning and displacement of the past*. The future, if it exists, depends on it. (*Intimate Revolt* 5; emphases added)

A non-linear temporality associated with etymological traces of revolt is manifested along with a psychoanalytic Freudian reading to prompt a focus on “the return of archaic, in the sense of the repressed but also the *Zeitlos* (timeless or lost time) of the drive” (*Sense* 12). Kristeva’s association of the revolt with the Freudian *Zeitlos*, the timelessness of the unconscious, is intriguing since the Freudian sense of the word suggests an unveiling, a return, a displacement, a renewal of the past memory that leads to our opening to the future.

Considering the acquaintance with the unconscious archaic involved in the process of displacement, what function is the pair of jade ornaments supposed to play in the time movements of turning forward and turning back to make Yinniang transform? First, the ornaments represent the tragic destiny of Princess Jiacheng who is sent to Weibo as a marriage gift to strengthen a political link; likewise, Yinniang’s proposed marriage with her cousin, the future Lord of Weibo, is also based on a parallel political interest. Second, there is a complicated bond between Yinniang and Hu Ji, since they develop a sense of empathy that allows them treat each other as a part of their selves. Yinniang’s mystical state of empathy makes her identify with Hu Ji who is “a subject capable of preverbal and verbal representations” (Kristeva, *New Maladies* 257). “I truly feel for Yinniang” offers such an obvious evidence to support a bond between them. In the process of transference, Yinniang finds herself not only transported to the site of the other (Hu Ji) but also becomes the same with the other. Being connoted with the symbolic meaning of “determined break-up,” the pair of jade ornaments presents the complex image of private separation and national change. The mise-en-scène is reinforced by lining up a large number of silk curtains to sway in the wind, layering the picture with sophistication, softened and melted. Being identified with Yinniang’s perspective partially hidden behind the gauze curtain, the camera sees an involved triangular love in the drama that sometimes seems clarified, yet still remains unsolved and puzzle-like. It shows a tender visual language, different from traditional martial arts films that emphasize masculine flavor instead of feminine

taste.

The pair of jade ornaments becomes a metaphor for an insidious form of resistance. It's a game of *fort-da*⁶ that navigates a psychic apparatus dealing with the moments of maternal absence and reappearance. Yinniang's newborn ability to tolerate and sublimate the frustration of losing one of the jade pieces after her broken engagement with Lord Tian, is a developmental stage following the sense of time. She now has the ability to anticipate the future return of the lost jade, which will ameliorate her relation to the maternal Princess. Holding the once lost jade again in her hand, she is attempting to keep alive the representation of the mother in her imagination after realizing that the Princess is dead. The implication behind this retrieval of the maternal image gives her ground to rearticulate a traumatic time as inseparable from the semiotic space and thus to pave a way to the working through of deep-rooted pain that she tries to uncover.

The similar "working through" of maternal temporality is revealed when she returns the jade to Tian and overhears Hu Ji's sympathy for her. This time, she is detached from her killer-self and embodies a maternal figure to save the pregnant Hu. The retrieval of the maternal image becomes attached to Yinniang who brings the motherhood out of the shadows, and, simultaneously, liberates her from the predefined role of assassin. Once having the ability of empathy for the rival Ju, she then is released from the spell of the nun-Princess who authorizes her to kill her beloved. The maternal body to which Yinniang returns to repeatedly, first that of the Princess, then her maternal self via Ju, is realized and associated with the temporality of "now and then": that to which she returns is temporal, displacing, renewing and marked with new beginnings for the future. That leads Yinniang to the "dissolution of her transference," and she becomes a maternal figure for the future.

Reborn for the Future

The drama of maternal experience is reinforced repeatedly with temporality. The question of time is already implicitly raised in the claim that maternal experience involves a repetition of the self's own archaic relation to the mother. In her article "Women's Time," Kristeva calls the temporal structure the "future perfect": *what will have happened*. "A kind of future perfect," she explains, "where the most deeply repressed past gives a distinctive character to a logical and

⁶ The term "*fort-da*" was invented by Freud in his article "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920).

sociological distribution of the most modern type” (188-89). As she puts it, the time of maternal experience is combined as the cyclical reappearance of the archaic past piercing through the linear unfolding of the present. Accordingly, the temporality of the future perfect does not deny the futurity of maternal experience but indicates a new-found future for the archaic past.

To read from Carol Watts’s perspective, Kristeva’s future perfect is “undoubtedly informed by a psychoanalytical account of time in which the future is approached retroactively” (Watts n. pag.). Kristeva tries to create a potential archaic space of play between the mother and the self that eventually is articulated in linguistic relations. This consideration of the archaic chora as the third element between mother and self avoids the misunderstanding of the pre-oedipal relations in terms of the fusion or the dyad that is necessary to be intruded upon by the paternal third element. In such a context, Kristeva creates a term called “the imaginary father,” which she derives from Freud’s “primary identification,” a person who “lies hidden” behind “the origin of the ego ideal” (Freud, *Ego* 26). She expounds, “It is through the father-loving mother’s sensitivity and discourse—a mother to whom I still belong and remain inseparable—that this ‘unification’ of myself-in-another-who-is-an-outsider is imprinted in me and structures me” (“New Forms” 13). Correspondingly, in her article “On the Melancholic Imaginary,” Kristeva elaborates to identify the “father of personal prehistory” with Freud’s so-called “primary identification” (8). The imaginary father creates a primary narcissistic screen for the self’s sexual differentiation. When maternal flow of feeling offers inadequate compensation for the loss caused by oneness with the mother, the self intrapsychically fabricates his/her own basis, an other that has both parents’ ideal characteristics. Kelly Oliver interprets the loving third as “the meaning of signification itself—that allows us to communicate through . . . an identification with the *agency* of meaning itself” (“Revolt and Forgiveness” 90).

In Wong Kai-wai’s *The Grandmaster*, Gong Er is an extraordinary female warrior who creates the temporal complexity of the maternal genealogy based on loss and transformation embedded with the sense of the “future perfect,” to use Kristeva’s well-known term, instead of unreflective reproduction of maternity. However, it is easy to observe that the imaginary father is able to provide a future relief to prevent the self from pure indeterminate present conflict. While Yinniang internalizes the energy of maternal figures to regenerate a cycle of reincarnation, Gong Er’s maternal energy comes less from any supported maternal substitute than from her interiority to counterbalance the hegemony of martial arts world. She is a sole originator of the maternal who has the perseverance of Athena, reversing the

stereotype of femininity. By providing a feminist articulation of maternal subjectivity, Gong Er represents an important figure attached to the imaginary other.

Gong Er's mother is absent from her life in the film, giving her an Athena complex, the identity of her father. Inheriting Athena's spirit, the vow to avenge her father's death becomes the driving force in her life. All alone, facing the male-dominated martial arts world after her father's death, she has the power of maternal care, embodying the multi-roles of daughter, sister, and mother, all in one, enough to counter the patriarchal hegemony of her time. She is eager to get out of the first level of the patriarchal fence, the glass uterus that the "mother" has added to the daughter. Therefore, being "without a mother" has become a necessary ritual for cultivating her feminine strength. Fortunately, her maternal energy is cultivated not from a biological mother but from her inner self, from the punishment inflicted on her in retaliation for an offense against the father. Although her attachment to her father is intimate, she does not agree with the convention that treats females as marginalized characters bound by traditional virtues. Instead she retains unique feminine values, cutting off the umbilical cord that binds her, and transcends the limitation of her gender.

However, Gong Er's engagement prevents her from getting revenge. She then rejects the marriage contract and takes back her surname. That is her first movement in the vow. In *Black Sun*, Kristeva describes a necessary ritual of "matricide": "For a man and for a woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous. Matricide is our vital necessity (*Black Sun* 27). Kristeva considers that women tend to be seduced into fusion with the mother, making them prone to suffer inner conflict. It is in this context that she introduces the notion of matricide by women, the rejection of whatever evokes attachment to the mother.

In the case of Gong Er, the urge for vengeance impels her to perform a psychical matricide: violent separation from the engagement that allows the security of a future family. This is a definite and unavoidable step once she is determined to exact revenge in honor of her father's name. However, that honor is challenged by her uncles, her father's generation, who criticize her revenge plan as nothing but a prideful boast, not to be achieved by a fragile woman like her. Only after practicing the ritual of matricide can she regain her subjectivity and return to her primary "happy source of life" where she can maintain her true essence of femininity, the so-called "maternal eroticism or reliance." Kristeva interprets this as something that "renders the fixation of the life and death drives both problematic and available, and places them together in the service of the living as an 'open structure,' related to

others and to the environment” (“Reliance” 71).

Gong Er has developed a vibrant new sense of self. The encounter with the mother born within herself as an erotic being brings her into a creative engagement with life. The inheritance of maternal eroticism is crucial to her humanity—a generational transmission of tenderness and passion in a concretized relationship with mother, self and the world. In Kristeva’s evocation of maternal eroticism, we discover hints to understand Gong Er’s inner thought and exterior behavior as encompassed by erotic transference and countertransference. Indeed, Gong Er contains those two seemingly contradictory qualities: the sublimation of passion, which is more crucial for being a mother since a competent mother should be a loving mother, but also the license to let herself grow independently.

The death of the father becomes a tragic event that dramatically torments and transforms her into a chivalrous heroine who apparently internalizes the father’s spirit into her strengthened body. The most iconic representation is when Gong Er holds her father’s spirit tablet (or a box of her father’s ashes) in the course of the funeral ceremony that has strengthened this theme. No visual emblem marks the film as more dramatic than the *memento mori* (Latin: remember you will die) expressing the liminal boundary between life and death, illusion and reality. The *mise-en-scène* presents a “taboo-like” object to recall a physical marker of what once was a person, at once uncanny and abject. The “felt absence” of the father involved in an abject tablet is an imprint of an intuitive empathy with archaic otherness. However, the father’s spirit tablet refuses to play dead. Slipping into Gong Er’s mind to be wrapped within her, it carries the whirling vitality of her father’s soul. The father’s dead past haunts the present daughter to weave an immediate strengthened future plan of avenging him.

Afterwards, she becomes a conglomeration with the paternal remains within her body. The imagination of the reunion of the father and the mother, the “imaginary father” of the two-in-one, can be interpreted as the rebirth of a chivalrous woman. Kelly Oliver, in her book *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind*, usefully interprets the meaning of the imaginary father. She elaborates:

The fantasy of the imaginary father as the conglomeration of mother and father can be read as a fantasy of reunion with the mother’s body, which takes the place of the real union that must be lost so that the child can enter language. . . . On my reading, the identification with the imaginary father, the father in individual prehistory, is an

identification with a fantasy of one's own conception. (79)

The fantasies of parents can be regarded as the imagination of the subject and the recollection of the mother. Kristeva believes that the loving father is an archaic feeling that is earlier than the Symbolic Father's love. She challenges the father's function in traditional psychoanalysis and proposes other possibilities. The imaginary father can be the father of the pre-oedipal father.

Gong Er concretizes Kristeva's concept of intimate revolt that embodies two forms of timelessness: the traumatic timelessness of absent future experienced in abjection and the timelessness of amatory idealization and connection to another. The former pushes her to time-axis limits and the latter links her to the imaginary father. Gong Er's inner intimacy dramatizes the double-movement between material abjection and idealized allure to a heterogeneous in-dwelling position of amatory identification with her father. She also makes manifest a moment of "intimate revolt," the emergence of psychic space within the subject's prehistory. Gong Er's encounter with her father's spirit points to Kristeva's theory of the imaginary⁷ where the presence of a loving father evokes primal energies and shapes phantasies that lead to her radical act of revenge.

The dramatization of Gong Er's inclination to be attached to her father's death that leads to her determination of taking revenge on Ma San could be explored as an intrapsychic activity of imaginary ambivalence regarding the archaic father. Gong Er's radical act of revenge and her sacrifice based on it, read from a Kristevan perspective, is designed to preserve a "two-sided and double-gendered figure of kinship" (Kristeva, *New Maladies* 22). Rather than restricting Gong Er's actions within an oedipal structure, Wong's film explores the unfolding development of the father's spirit as a creative and presymbolic process rather than as a fixed biological paternal image. Being the locus of energized transference, the dead father image forces Gong Er to meditate on the discrepancy between the corporeal body and ideal identification, which limits the support needed for the creation of psychic space. The archaic site is likewise associated with Ip Man. Gong Er's box of hair ashes and her father's box of ashes (or father's spirit tablet) stand in counterpoint to each other. While her father's death triggers cataclysmic events, Gong Er's unburial

⁷ Kristeva's psychological space of the imaginary, originally theorized by Jacques Lacan, has become a pivotal manifestation of the paternal metaphor with which a proto-subject identifies during its subjective formation. The imaginary father effectively screens the subject's perception of the void and manifests an early embodiment of the third party, breaking apart the dyadic bond of the mother and child. As a law-giving and paternal aspect of the supportive maternal body, the imaginary father is accessible to both the semiotic and symbolic registers.

air ashes represent an image of the eternal return of the unrestricted and true feminine self. The box of hair ashes is her gift left to Ip Man after her death. No longer to be considered a sign of aesthetic beauty, the lock of hair ashes belongs to a bodily part that is closely related to the abject. Being defined as a bodily female waste element, it even transcends death as it continues to grow like a phoenix rising from the ashes. She risks her life in the creation of what Kristeva calls an “imaginary universe” that involves both her father and Ip Man, two visions of the imaginary father. In their last meeting, she confesses her love to Ip Man, she says,

I want to go *home*. But I want to return this [*the button*] to you first. As for the *Sixty-four Hands*, I've already forgotten them. I was lucky to meet you in my prime. Sadly, my time is running out. To say there are no regrets in life, is just to fool yourself. How boring it would be without regrets. Mr. Ip, to tell you the truth, *I used to have you in my heart*. (*The Grandmaster* 01:47:50-01:49:20; emphases added)

Sixty-four Hands, a memorial button, and a motif of going home, all of them are relative to time—past memories and future expectation. The lover’s discourse starts when she fights against Ip Man to defend her father’s honor, one of the most romantic scenes in the film. Twirling in slow motion, their battle against each other resembles the dance movements of a tango duet since their faces and bodies closely approach each other dangerously yet intimately. Another interesting thing to notice is that Ip Man simulates Gong Er’s Sixty-four Hands of *Bagua Zhang*. Seeing the two of them is like looking at a reflection in a mirror for their movements are the same as they express the exchange of affection. Gong Er has become Ip Man’s sparring match, an imaginary other whose narcissistic likeness manifested in the Sixty-four Hands techniques evolves into an eternal kind of vision that is imprinted in his heart. There is a convincing mutual attraction hovering in the air accompanied by Stefano Lentini’s “Stabat Mater.” A thirteenth-century Christian hymn to Mary, the song portrays Mary’s suffering during her son’s crucifixion.

Likewise, Gong Er is destined to be a benevolent maternal figure who not only sacrifices her life and marriage to avenge her father but also keeps her love toward Ip Man eternally. In her heart, Gong Er treats Ip Man as important as her father whose strategic withdrawal from the martial arts world is realized with the intent to greet the successor Ip Man. Rather, the successor is not just Ip Man but also Gong Er, who knows clearly that she will eventually return to the world of martial arts to write her story of self-rebellion. However, the father’s last will is that

the daughter not retaliate against Ma San for his death. The implication is that he does not want his daughter to take the risk of losing her life and marriage. But she will definitely seek justice for her father. After her father's death, she pleads with the Buddha in a temple as she seeks an epiphany from the imaginary father. Like in the last aristocratic generation of Greek tragedies, Gong Er and her father are reunited with the idea of an intersubjective space of the imaginary father.

As a reminder, Ip Man gives her the button off his winter coat that he tears off and has preserved for a trip to see her, but later it gets sold out of economic necessity. In their final encounter, she returns it to its owner, a gesture of denial strengthened by the action of reciprocating his gift by giving him the box of her hair ashes. The button is a love token to recall the past time of their competition at the Golden Building and a potential promise for their future encounter. The memorial button, for Ip Man, is a visual prompt to dislodge his attachment toward Gong Er; in turn she accepts such an invitation to the narcissistic union, Ip Man-with-Gong-Er, an image of amatory experience, lingering on narcissism. It is proper to read this from Kristeva's re-elaboration of primary narcissism, where she describes the "narcissistic screen" (*Tales* 45). This self-love focused in the nature of transference, in a similar vein, is defined by Pleshette DeArmitt in *The Right to Narcissism* as "unthinkable and unlivable without the other" (14).

However, her returning of the hidden love token surfaces as an outlier to terminate the transference fortified by the lock of hair ashes. She burns her lock of hair into ashes and leaves it to Ip Man as a departing souvenir, symbolizing not only the memory of unrequited love but also the essence of her true self. Concisely, Gong Er is literally recollected by her burnt soul. That could be the meaning of the word "ashes." What is left of her? The dead father lives on in her memories and becomes alive. Her father's three stages of becoming a real grandmaster vividly appear: "seeing yourself, seeing the world, seeing all living beings." In her final phase, she chooses to ask for Ip Man's help to fulfill her unfinished journey through the last stage: to pass on the spirit of martial arts to the next generation. We might see it as the last call from the imaginary father. It is also consistent to recall the image of Gong Er's burning ashes: as the father Gong insists, "Keep the light burning." The mission will be passed down from Ip Man, just as her father wished.

Holding her father's spirit tablet in the funeral, Gong Er changes her destiny by directing attention backwards to the past/lost time of living together with the father that causes her to reflect on prior events of what it means to be at home with the self and in love with the other. The lost time is a return movement that retrieves the forgotten continent of the body of the imaginary father that is meant to elaborate

a future not confined by past and present routines. It is the foundation for Gong Er to pursue the politics of transformation and change. The route from the father's spirit tablet to the daughter's ashes box makes a crucial contribution to contest the unusual interpretation of triangulation in terms of the oedipal complex in its imaginary and symbolic dimensions. It also raises a question for the future connection between language and symbolic paternity with a cultural and amorous background rather than for inherent family reasons. Besides the relationship between Gong Er and her father, on a complex parallel level the interpretation of Ip and her father could be expanded to finally detect an intimate bodily relationship between Gong Er and Ip Man. Being attached to an alternative paternal function, Gong Er is enacting the archaic imaginary father, embodying her dead father, and Ip Man supports her against the emptiness resulting from the experience of abjection and contributes to her ability of becoming a speaking being. The imaginary father invites Gong Er to exchange the father for the mother; thus, her revolt signifies the transgression of paternal prohibition and the return to the archaic, the timelessness of the drive to be worked through via dissolution of transference. A new ethics is thus built by reflection on the other, first the other that is her father, then Ip Man.

In the extreme time of facing her father's death by holding his spirit tablet, Gong Er senses an unbound time that departs from biological time and the time of consciousness and is caused by the psychological resistance that it incites. This is also a trace of memorial excitation, remaining in unconscious time, working through resistance and the double-time of interpretation, so she must approach it repeatedly to resist any blockage in the present to prevent her from taking revenge on her father. The phase of dissolution of transference, for Gong Er, is always related to Ip Man, the time when she returns the button to him, and the time when she leaves him the ashes box. The first memory trace, the button, signals the end of their relationship, the time of separation from Ip Man who confronts the tragic event with the potentiality of Gong Er's departure from him forever, and Gong Er's own liability to dissolution. Gong Er is Ip Man's identical self. In martial arts, she is as fascinated by him as he is by her since he is the successor chosen by her father.

There is an obvious undercurrent of intimate revolt in Gong Er's burnt ashes, a receding image that remains as a permanent inscription of the temporality of her past and the overwhelming experience of the present that leads to her future story, one to be recited from generation to generation. Unlike Ip Man's button, the ashes of her lock of hair go beyond the thought of preservation of the lost object and are inserted with the implication of the "letting go" motif. The significance of returning to the site of pain acknowledges suffering to be the remnant of freedom. Reading

the return to the site of suffering in Kristeva's view is to encounter a "total word, new, foreign to the language' (Mallarmé), for the purpose of capturing the unnamable" (*Black Sun* 42). The myth of Gong Er, thus, is a story implanted with interminable time that describes a new story of female desire and subjectivity. Gong Er's visual narrative actually is described more dramatically than Ip Man's dominant narrative. The two stories are combined in the film. Indeed, if you were to say the film is a biopic of Gong Er, it would make perfect sense to label it as a story of a female swordswoman outside the time of history. Her discourse is not to deconstruct the origin but to recuperate the potential space before the sign. The prospect of Gong Er's exclusion from the patriarchal world of martial arts is fundamental to the thinking of time. Gong Er's time, constrained within the closed homogeneous doctrine of main history, is repositioned completely within Kristevan psychoanalytic logic in which freedom, concretized via symbols of the spirit tablet and hair ashes, finds its own temporality in the rhythm of the imaginary space that creates an originary spatialization of relations inserted in renovated and transcendent time.

Liberation from the constriction of time is a frequent motif revealed not just from the ashes symbol in Wong's film but also from the bluebird symbol in *The Assassin*. Hou's film reconciles two ambivalent operations of semiotic force and symbolic function by positing the value of the imaginary father/other. In the *mise-en-scène* Yinniang speaks after being wounded by the masked assassin who turns out to be Tian Ji'an's wife Lady Tian Yuan. She narrates:

Princess Jiacheng taught me the zither
 She told me a story about a bluebird's dance
 She herself was the bluebird.
 She left the Court for Weibo all by herself.
There was no one like her in Weibo.
 (*The Assassin* 01:14:50-01:16:48; emphasis added)

The lines, each filled with the Princess's image, are a reflection quoted exactly from her story of the bluebird mentioned previously in flashbacks. Speaking tenderly to the broken-armed father with a sympathetic facial expression while the mirror-polisher is tenderly applying a plaster to her back wound, she rephrases Princess Jiacheng's parable about a detained bird singing to death while seeing its own reflection in a mirror. On the process of becoming a speaking subject, Yinniang's articulation provides her a cure to save her from "aphasia" and "no

language.” To quote Kristeva, “through the word we regain the lost Thing, most significantly the maternal body” (*Intimate Revolt* 226). Yinniang is babbling out her first speech sounds, a way to sustain a certain brand of feminine narrative by echoing Princess Jiacheng’s words. This reveals not merely a bygone maternal time, but also a thorough indulgence in the immediate present awkward role of assassin and the future prospect of retreat inspired by the imaginary father, “the semiotic as it takes form within the Symbolic or signification” (Oliver, “Revolt and Forgiveness” 83). Through identification with Princess Jiacheng, along with the reassurance from the nurturing two-in-one imaginary father, sympathetic Father Nie and the soothing mirror-polisher, Yinniang’s rephrasing of the words of the other (Princess) has shifted her over to becoming like the other, a Kristevan “subject of enunciation” (Kristeva, *Tales* 38).

Apart from the maternal figures, the space of creation of the imaginary father/other is also a trigger to approach her father and the mirror-polisher. When Yinniang is seen to be in loving relation to an imaginary other—the mirror-polisher, her hostility is transformed into a new understanding. Thus her openness to the speech of her otherness as a caged bluebird is the most everlasting quality that encourages her to develop her feminine specificity. Yinniang owns the ability to transform potential-maternal space into language, so that her words intrinsically allow the possibility of a connection with the love from the other. It is this enunciative position that offers transference to bear the weight of estrangement and to allow her to see clearly how she is bonded with the mirror-polisher who offers a narcissistic reflection, like the symbol of bluebird-and-mirror recalled from Princess Jiacheng. The transference also encourages Yinniang to be retired from the chaotic political scene after she “has given up her role as a woman warrior, and is at peace with the natural world (Rist 158). The way that she builds a future with the mirror-polisher is perceived in the last *mise-en-scène* of the film where a pastoral foreground paves a way for their journey until they fade away into a spectacular mountain landscape.

The natural landscape is in harmony with Yinniang’s inner motherhood. Yinniang’s inner waves are struggling constantly as birds pass over thousands of undulating lakes, revealing the radiant insights of her chaste mind that is incarnated in the golden flowers and plants in the field to show new life opportunities. The objective landscape reveals Yinniang’s subjective life sentiment of returning to “archaic revolt.” The Tang Dynasty and Weibo being immersed in the confusion of war stimulates Yinniang’s desire to return to the hidden mountain forest, to seek the catalytic effect of inner healing, and to summon the landscape into the mother spirit.

Hou discovers that “[T]he mountains, the highlands, the fogs, and the trees, for example, are very realistic, not impressionistic” (Suchenski 194). The aesthetics of those landscape mises-en-scène concretely embedded with the techniques of long takes and slow panning contributes to display the layered landscape of Mother Nature. Personification of natural landscape focuses on the life-giving and nurturing aspects of nature embodied in the character of Yinniāng who consistently returns to her pre-oedipal phase, the archaic self to search for the strength of the m/other.

Gong Er’s empowerment, on the contrary, enforces her to internalize her motherhood into herself; no longer having the distinction between subject and object, she returns to the original narcissism of the source of life, “I am the world, the world is me.” Unlike Yinniāng’s “multiple maternal identity” disorder, as a sole initiator from her will, in a temporal analysis, Gong Er situates her feminine sensibility and creativity to create the imaginary m/other as alternative spaces that could generate renovated ways for remediating the meaning of “intimate revolt.” Daring to retrieve the forgotten zone of the body in the lost time, Gong Er and Yinniāng find their future defined by past memories and present plans. Not only do their stories create a rhythmic momentum of return to a nostalgic past, they also offer a visual aesthetic for a politics of transformation. These women assume responsibility for female heritage and for its future.

The future lies in the hands of an imaginary other. “Gong Er” the director Wong Kar-wai says, “is in a way a symbol of a time that he (Ip) wants to go back to. It’s almost like a lost paradise” (qtd. in Kelsey n. pag.). In the pairing of this couple, there is an attempt to share a legacy from Chinese martial arts, which is “to keep the fire burning.” As an authentic *Bagua* master, Gong Er has lingered in the past world where she practices Sixty-four Hands in the Manchurian snow against the power of nature; this is an imaginary recall of her “happiest time.” Yet her attachment to the past is not a chronological past; rather, it is a semiotic state of oneness and togetherness attached to maternal nature. Stephen Teo points out, “the pinnacle of the martial arts is to align one’s unconscious with the natural world” (538). Retreating to the maternal landscape for her final visual image, Gong Er approaches a nostalgic return to touch on the essence of maternal desire by liberating her culturally constructed body whose bond to Ip Man makes potential new beginnings. In their last meeting, Gong Er details her last wish to Ip Man: “My father said mastery had three stages—being, knowing, and doing. I know myself. I’ve seen the world. Sadly, I can’t pass on what I know. This is a road I won’t see to the end. I hope you will.” Ultimately, such an “open future” is something that she constantly mediates on through her return to the maternal other. “To keep the fire burning,”

thus, becomes the eternal vow of their spiritual marriage contract to create a future for the collective regeneration of writing on the martial arts.

It is in the same context that one observes an “open future” for Yinniang who also retreats from chaotic political forces to a reclusive landscape of nature. Her approach to the past memory, especially that of Princess Jiacheng, evokes the nostalgic reflection of a loving maternal image as well as her present dilemma of being a solitary assassin. Hou has created a visual model of feminine empowerment whose reception aims toward Yinniang’s possible future by grafting the past onto the future with a nurturing psychic space of nature out of a destructive present. Compared with Gong Er, Yinniang is less tragic since she still has the mirror-polisher as her life-partner. Walking into a future, they avoid the noises of the chaotic world.

Coda: Female Empowerment

The positive dynamic of intimate revolt can be assumed in the case of Yinniang to be the double infinity of interrogating return and linguistic expression. Her revolt as return is crucial because it takes her back to the necessary moment of affectivity and heterogeneity especially with memories of Princess Jiacheng that cannot be temporalized yet they help her to speak out her inner conflict revealed by rephrasing Princess’ story of the bluebird. That traumatic experience is sublimated and accomplished in words. Hence, her rephrasing of the Princess’ story of “bluebird-and-mirror” to these two figures of the loving imaginary paternal figures, her father and the mirror-polisher, becomes a “talking cure,” a recuperation during which she achieves the articulation of her inner interrogation to create a new beginning for her psychic life.

Nevertheless, as far as the articulation of intimacy in Gong Er’s revolt is concerned, there is a different story that provides not an account of rebirth, but the opposite: the event of death. The event of her father’s death forces her to perform a ritual of matricide situated at the threshold of semiotic loss and symbolic failure that eventually rehabilitates her to a marginalized site. Surprisingly, she develops an ability to gather her resources for negotiating the death drive. A possibility of the future might have been realized if she could have evoked Kristeva’s “imaginary father,” since the latter would constitute a positive movement of the self “into time” of the future. Ip Man is not just her father’s chosen successor in martial arts but also her replacement to perform the unfinished job of enlightenment. Her hair ashes and the father’s tablet reintegrate thanatology into the logic of the living, insofar as they

disavow femininity, a strategic construction of patriarchy, while simultaneously supporting femininity with the implication that she has learned how to flaunt the gaps to amplify her role model as a chivalrous female warrior recognized by the future generations.

Consequently, Gong Er and Yinniang opt for the ritual of killing, a psychic metonymy, so as to expel their all-consuming abjection and thus fulfill the access to the imaginary m/other/father. Whereas Yinniang's decision not to kill her cousin Tian Ji-an releases her from self-mutilation, Gong Er's decision to kill her senior apprentice Ma San is also coupled with the tender aspect of the imaginary other as the essential future portion of a psychic life of importance. Indeed, intimate revolt happens in the imagination, the self's relation with the other. In imaginary experience, this intimacy is deployed in its mode of revolt. The love of the "other" enables both women to separate themselves from the repressed maternal obligation in order to become respected maternal figures for a new generation.

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