

A Comparative Analysis of the Female Protagonist's Image in *The Judge Goes to Pieces* (1948) and *Justice, My Foot!* (1992) Adaptation of *Shen Si Guan* from a Social Gender Perspective

Jiahui Wu

Abstract:

This study compares the portrayal of Mrs. Sung in two Hong Kong comedy adaptations of *Shen Si Guan*: the 1948 version *The Judge Goes To Pieces* (starring Hung Sin-nui) and the 1992 version *Justice, My Foot!* (starring Anita Mui). Through a social gender theory framework, it examines three dimensions—capability empowerment, emotional expression, and family status—to trace shifting gender norms and power dynamics. The analysis reveals a paradox: while the 1992 version empowers Mrs. Sung's martial prowess and overt emotion, it undermines her intellectually, upholding patriarchal compromise. Conversely, the 1948 version confines her to domesticity, mirroring the suppression of women's autonomy in its era. Ultimately, the paper argues that these gendered portrayals are historically contingent constructs, highlighting the tensions between commercial film-making and progressive feminist discourse.

Keywords: social gender theory, feminism, patriarchy, Hong Kong cinema, [*Justice, My Foot!*], Anita Mui

1. Introduction

The Judge Goes to Pieces (1948)[1] and its 1992 remake, *Justice, My Foot!*[2]—both titled *Shen Si Guan* in Chinese—are landmark Hong Kong comedies that subvert the male-dominated courtroom drama genre by centering on Mrs. Sung, a female character who champions justice. Set in the Qing dynasty, both films follow barrister Sung Sai-kit and

his wife as they combat bureaucratic corruption to exonerate Yeung Sau-chun, a widow falsely accused of murdering her husband. The narrative highlights Mrs. Sung's proactive characterization, which distinguishes her from the *huaping* stereotype—a physically attractive but underdeveloped female role—prevalent in that era.

Both films are Hong Kong-produced comedies starring iconic actors of their respective eras: the 1948

version stars Ma Sze-tsang and Hung Sin-nui, while the 1992 adaptation features Stephen Chow and Anita Mui. These critically acclaimed works achieved significant commercial success—the 1948 version was documented as “commercially successful in both stage performances and cinematic releases” [3], while *Justice, My Foot!* (1992) set a new Hong Kong box office record with nearly HK\$50 million (approximately US\$6.4 million at 1992 exchange rates). This paper examines how these two iterations negotiate social gender norms through capability empowerment, emotional expression, and family status, using the films as a lens to analyze shifting ideologies of female representation and the comedic genre’s engagement with feminist discourse.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Prior Research on *The Judge Goes to Pieces and Justice, My Foot!*

Existing scholarship in mainland China primarily examines these films through the lens of star studies—focusing on actors like Ma Sze-tsang and Stephen Chow—while offering only tangential critiques within broader discussions of these performers’ careers.

However, emerging scholarship has begun to explore the feminist dimensions of the 1992 version. In his monograph *Dreaming with the City: Anita Mui and Hong Kong Pop Culture*, Pan Lei (Chin Pang) analyzes how the film situates Mrs. Sung within Hong Kong’s shifting gender dynamics while drawing on Anita Mui’s own star persona. Lei contends that Mui’s portrayal subverts the “male gaze” prevalent in Hong Kong’s comedic cinema, crafting a uniquely assertive heroine[4]. Parallel to this analysis, Cheung and Gilson examine the paradoxical representation of Mrs. Sung, whose formidable martial prowess contrasts with her narrative subordination to her husband, thereby revealing persistent patriarchal constraints within Hong Kong cinema[5].

2.2 Social Gender Theory

Emerging in the mid-20th century, social gender theory distinguishes between biological sex (innate attributes) and gender (socially constructed roles, behaviors, and emotions)[6]. As a product of sociocultural and power relations, gender has historically been constructed within patriarchal systems—“He is the Subject; he is absolute. She is the Other.”[7]—which burden women with symbolic labels of weakness, passivity, and subordination. This systemic oppression institutionalizes gendered hierarchies that perpetuate structural inequalities[8]. Crucially, the

theory acknowledges—as articulated by R. W. Connell[9] and bell hooks[10]—that while women’s subordination is socially constructed, men’s autonomy is equally constrained by rigid gender norms. Given gender’s malleability, however, these constructs can be deconstructed to envision more equitable social orders that benefit all genders.

3. Analysis

3.1 Capability Empowerment: From Martial Prowess to Intellectual Ambivalence

The concept of “capability” has historically functioned as a defining marker of gendered distinctions: men are stereotypically ascribed agentic traits (e.g., decision-making, leadership), whereas women are relegated to affective labor and domesticity. Such categorization inherently reflects the performative enactment of gendered norms entrenched within patriarchal power structures[11]. When female characters exhibit traditionally masculine capabilities, they engage in non-conventional gendered performances, thereby exposing the artificiality of gender norms.

The most striking difference in character portrayal between the 1992 Anita Mui version of Mrs. Sung and the 1948 Hung Sin-nui version lies in the former’s martial prowess, which contrasted with the latter’s ordinariness. Historically, women’s martial arts training aimed primarily at physical resilience and self-protection from illness and harassment. Such training was traditionally more socially acceptable for women than literary pursuits in Chinese culture.

The screenwriters’ decision to endow the 1992 Anita Mui version of Mrs. Sung with martial prowess strategically appropriates a traditionally masculine trait, elevating her narrative significance and enabling the organic development of pivotal scenes, including:

- Outsmarting the local bully (To, 1992, 00:04:36)
- Forcing her husband to abandon his career (To, 1992, 00:13:13)
- Rescuing her husband at the inn (To, 1992, 00:21:38)
- Defeating the killers pursuing her husband on the avenue (To, 1992, 01:07:43)

This establishes a complementary dynamic: her physical prowess contrasts with her husband’s intellectual cunning, allowing the couple to leverage their distinct skills seamlessly across scenarios. Simultaneously, the film subverts the “damsel-in-distress” trope through comedic reversals of “beauty-saves-hero” moments, blending gender critique with slapstick humor.

In stark contrast, Hung Sin-nui’s 1948 portrayal of Mrs.

Sung exhibits no capabilities beyond conventional femininity, being confined to domestic labor such as cooking and nursing her beaten husband—a reinforcement of traditional gendered expectations. Despite her “strong sense of justice” (Yeung, 1948, 00:23:31), she lacks autonomous agency, relying solely on persuasion to spur her husband into action. This narrative choice lays bare how the isolation of gender disciplines women into accepting subordinate roles, denying them the possibility of transcendence while binding their fates to male authority. Such characterization mirrors the lived realities of Hong Kong women in the 1950s: post-war society relegated working-class women to low-wage, low-skilled jobs or economic dependence on husbands.

In the shared plot of “Mrs. Sung Urging Her Husband to Defend Yang’s Innocence”, the 1948 and 1992 versions diverge starkly in her agency. In the earlier film, Mrs. Sung fabricates a plea for help by claiming Yeung Sau-chun sought her husband’s legal expertise due to his fame—a ruse he swiftly dismantles (Yeung, 1948, 00:20:40). Conversely, the 1992 iteration depicts her physically cornering her husband into action using martial prowess (To, 1992, 00:34:05). This contrast hinges on Mrs. Sung’s possession (or lack) of autonomous agency, which not only drives narrative momentum but also defines the characters’ narrative weight.

Simultaneously, the screenwriters counterbalance Mrs. Sung’s martial prowess in the 1992 Anita Mui version by depicting her legal petition as riddled with errors and her husband’s dismissive labeling of her as “foolish”. Yet her tactical ingenuity is undeniable in scenes:

- Kicking a bully into manure (To, 1992, 00:04:40)
- Forcing her husband to climb a ladder through a frog prank (To, 1992, 00:15:00)
- Collaborating with her husband to expose corruption (To, 1992, 01:30:10)

This deliberate emphasis on her perceived “foolishness” serves to preserve balance between the hero and heroine and to appease male audiences. This constitutes a narrative compromise that reflects persistent gender biases. Had Mrs. Sung been portrayed as both intellectually and physically formidable against her husband’s purely scholarly role, the male lead’s authority would have been diminished, thus violating patriarchal expectations. Ultimately, this narrative choice mirrors the gender ideological limitations pervasive in 1990s Hong Kong society.

3.2 Emotional Expression: From Restraint to Radical Authenticity

In both films, the depictions of emotions concerning Mrs. Sung—or rather, concerning pre-modern Chinese wom-

en—primarily encompass love and familial bonds, which will be analyzed separately below.

3.2.1 Spousal Love

In pre-modern Chinese society, married women were expected to be obedient and reverent toward their husbands, while the public expression of marital affection was considered taboo. Both portrayals of Mrs. Sung, however, represent varying degrees of rebellion against this convention.

In the 1948 *The Judge Goes To Pieces* (Yeung):

In the scene where she urges Sung Sai-kit to vindicate Yeung, Mrs. Sung engages in pointed dialogue and delivering merciless criticism of her husband in front of Yeung and the servants (Yeung, 1948, 00:22:40). The couple’s sole display of marital intimacy occurs at the ending, when officials escort the couple from the magistrate’s court. Sung jests: “This time I won’t need to wear face powder and flowers, will I?” (Yeung, 1948, 01:33:24), referencing Mrs. Sung’s earlier act of dressing him as a woman to shame him for refusing Yeung’s case. Mrs. Sung responds with a knowing, coquettish smile. Their interaction subtly conveys the husband’s fulfillment of his wife’s demand (to defend Yeung) and her satisfaction with his actions. The Provincial Inspector’s interjection—“What’s this about face powder and flowers?”—serves as a foil to their private understanding. Beyond this moment, however, displays of marital affection are absent. When Sung paces anxiously plotting to steal a letter, Mrs. Sung expresses concern in a curt tone, only to be rebuffed with equal terseness (Yeung, 1948, 00:53:20). This scene epitomizes the emotional detachment, neglect of relational maintenance, and petty antagonism characteristic of conventional 1950s marital portrayals.

In the 1992 *Justice, My Foot!* (To):

In 1992 version, Mrs. Sung’s emotional expression can be described as “uninhibited.” This is epitomized in the law court, where she blows kiss affectionately to her husband in front of the crowd, receiving his exaggerated and fervent response in return. Their intimate interaction, accompanied by melodious and tender background music, creates a stark contrast with the judicial atmosphere (To, 1992, 00:44:10). Throughout the film, the couple’s unabashed affection is a recurring theme:

- They express deep love for each other in front of their bedroom (To, 1992, 00:24:55);
- When Mrs. Sung is slapped during a trial, it ignites Sung Sai-kit’s rage. He vows, “Even if my son lacks of his manhood, I will avenge this,” swearing to clear Yeung Sau-chun’s name—this being a direct response to his earlier vow upon retiring as a barrister that should he ever resume legal practice, his son would be

born without manhood, an extremely grave curse in Chinese culture. This decisive moment, driven by the need to defend of his wife, becomes the story's pivotal turning point (To, 1992, 00:39:30);

- Seeing Sung Sai-kit's madness, Mrs. Sung tearfully declares, "No matter what he becomes, he's still my husband." In response, Sung shows "I love you" on his palm to his wife (To, 1992, 01:18:00).

These scenes fully illustrate the profound, life-and-death bond between the couple, while also testifying to Mrs. Sung's unreserved display of love—a stark departure from the traditional Chinese feminine ideal. This embodies the bold and intense love values of Hong Kong women in the 1990s.

During the courtroom climax, the 1992 Sung couple cooperatively manipulates Magistrate Ho's wife into confessing through a strategy of reverse psychology. This breaks the stereotype of females subordination to men and shatters conservative notions of female inferiority. Their success, which is achieved through mutual reinforcement and equal partnership, originates from their deep affective connection and tacit understanding. It subtly echoes modern marital values: only through unity and joint effort can happiness be attained.

3.2.2 Maternal Love

Both films offer minimal exploration of Mrs. Sung's maternal bonds—despite the pivotal narrative role of the fear of offspring dying in Sung Sai-kit's initial refusal to take Yeung Sau-chun's wrongful case.

In the 1948 *The Judge Goes To Pieces* (Yeung):

The Sung infant appears exclusively as comic relief during the final trial when Mrs. Sung exclaims: "Disaster! My son has soiled himself!" (Yeung, 1948, 01:21:00). Moreover, the profound trauma of recurrent child mortality is distilled into a darkly humorous couplet within her courtroom monologue: "I bear a child at each year's dawn, Yet bury him before the year is gone." (Yeung, 1948, 01:20:40)

In the 1992 *Justice, My Foot!* (To):

Though child loss remains Sung's reason for retiring from law, depictions of parental love primarily serve to magnify the couple's relationship. This is exemplified in the feigned-madness prison scene: when Sung threatens their daughter with a blade, Mrs. Sung "desperately grasps the blade's edge" rather than shielding the infant, weeping, "Husband, have you lost your mind? This is your own daughter!" (To, 1992, 01:16:41). Her anguish reveals a greater distress over her husband's sanity than anxiety for their child's safety. This spousal prioritization is further reinforced in the film's happy ending, in which the camera initially centers on the embracing couple before widen-

ing to include their children, persistently maintaining the spouses as the visual core (To, 1992, 01:37:30).

This "spouse-first, children-second" hierarchy is deliberately constructed to confront entrenched gender norms. Specifically, it challenges the prescription that women are culturally bound to invest exclusively in children, treating offspring as primary emotional anchors. Anita Mui's portrayal of Mrs. Sung transcends this conventional maternal fixation. Her emotional universe orbits around marital bond with children occupying a secondary sphere. This dynamic embodies a progressive family model, positing a harmonious and balanced relationship between husband, wife and children.

3.3 Family Status: Height, Shot, and Hierarchical Subversion

Both films primarily employ cinematic language and narrative sequencing to express shifting status between the Sung. This dynamic avoids fixed hierarchies while revealing context-dependent fluctuations in spousal authority.

In the 1948 *The Judge Goes To Pieces* (Yeung):

Couple dialogues are frequently framed in symmetrical medium shots, visually reinforcing their partnership. Key examples include: Mrs. Sung informing Sung of Yeung Sau-chun's plight (Yeung, 1948, 00:19:45); Sung copying letters discovered by his wife (Yeung, 1948, 01:01:00); and their equal kneeling positions during the trial (Yeung, 1948, 01:17:06). It is remarkable that the critical scene in which Mrs. Sung persuades Sung to draft the appeal (00:29:20) employs deliberate vertical staging—she stands outside the room in a physically elevated position, looking down at her husband, who is confined within. Their communication occurs through a broken paper window, which frames her face in a disciplinary gaze directed at him.

Nevertheless, these visual cues should not be misinterpreted as a symbol of a narrative where female status surpasses male. In the scene when Yeung Chuen visits to discuss the case, Sung peremptorily dismisses both Mrs. Sung and Yeung Sau-chun from the room (Yeung, 1948, 01:13:51). Despite Mrs. Sung's deep engagement with the case and Yeung Sau-chun's direct stake in it as the victim, neither woman is allowed to participate in the discussion. This moment starkly conveys the patriarchal subtext that weighty matters belong to men's counsel; women should not intervene. Ultimately, the film reinforces the traditional gender construct that deems women to be "less rational than men" and thus unqualified to engage in serious affairs.

In the 1992 *Justice, My Foot!* (To):

The height difference between the Sungs is repeatedly emphasized as a comedic element that simultaneously functions as a visual signifier of power dynamics. In their first shared frame on the avenue, the composition grants them equal space (To, 1992, 00:05:43). Yet the deliberate camera setup ensures Mrs. Sung stands half a head taller than her husband (Stephen Chow: 174cm; Anita Mui: 168cm). This physical disparity, maintained in subsequent shots, culminates in the scene where Sung, resentful of his wife's height, storms home on stilts and complains: "Now you understand the agony of me being shorter than my wife?"

Mrs. Sung thereby subverts this patriarchal anxiety through her tender reply: "A man's physical height means nothing; what truly matters is how high he aspires. In my heart, your position is supreme." The scene's resolution then visually confirms her rhetoric: when Sung descends emotionally and physically—leaping off the stilts to embrace her—the camera exaggerates his comically diminished stature, framing his head aligned with her chest (To, 1992, 00:25:15).

However, this subversion of the power dynamic proves transient. A pivotal mid-film scene abruptly reasserts patriarchal control when Mrs. Sung, mistaking sleeping officers for her husband in the act of adultery, attacks them before realizing her error. The composition immediately shifts to reinforce traditional hierarchy: Sung promptly sits beside the officers, while his wife collapses to her knees in a panic—creating a visual tableau of three men presiding over a single woman.

Sung's interrogation—"Why invade a men's room?"—frames her action as a violation of gendered space. Her tearful, absurd plea ("Is it a convincing reason that I come to borrow a chamber pot?") is met with his conspiratorial alliance with the officers, who function as a patriarchal jury; they whisper before unanimously rejecting her excuse. Crucially, Sung was aware of his wife's mistaken identity upon her entry yet deliberately allowed the humiliating scene to unfold. He only theatrically "rushes in" to seize dominance after she recognizes her error. He then blames his wife for her mistrust and imposes three escalating demands that rebuild his authority: "No more towering hairstyles! No more beating me! No more confronting me!" (To, 1992, 00:56:50). This moment transcends a mere comedic misunderstanding; it constitutes a deliberate incident that overturns their longstanding power imbalance.

These scenes serve as evidence that the 1992 version deliberately subverts rigid gender hierarchies. The symbolic equation of physical height with social status functions as a "bodily insignia" through which patriarchy engraves gender stratification—traditionally demanding a taller

husband/shorter wife as the normative match. The director deploys the recurring "wife-taller-than-husband" visual trope for comedic effect, thereby unconsciously exposing and destabilizing the construction of patriarchal norms. Yet by consistently portraying the Sung couple's relationship as genuinely affectionate, the film fundamentally undermines the legitimacy of patriarchal hierarchy, delivering progressive messaging to the audience beneath its comedic appearance.

Nevertheless, by framing marital power as a rigid binary opposition—one that merely alternates between the husband's dominance and the wife's supremacy—the film reduces gender liberation to a simple role reversal rather than envisioning a true equality. Gender scholars, however, provide a deeper structural critique that the film lacks. Patriarchy oppresses women while simultaneously exploiting men via the "breadwinner" role. This system traps men by enforcing sole economic responsibility, suppressing emotional expression, and glorifying violence—rendering them collateral victims of the very structure they seem to command [9][12][13]. Consequently, feminism seeks not female domination over men, but collective liberation. Thus, gender liberation advocates for every individual's freedom to transcend patriarchal discipline and define their authentic selves.

4. Conclusion: Gender Fluidity, Power Dynamics, and Critical Interrogation of Cinematic Representation

This comparative analysis underscores the fluidity of gender representation in cinema, shaped by historical context and commercial pragmatism. While the 1992 *Justice, My Foot!* advances feminist themes through Mrs. Sung's capability and emotional autonomy, it simultaneously perpetuates patriarchal concessions, exemplifying the tension between progressive intent and market constraints. Conversely, the 1948 film's confinement of female agency to domesticity mirrors systemic gender oppression. Both male-dominated films reveal the limitations and potential of popular media in challenging gender norms. For filmmakers, this study advocates narrative strategies that harmonize entertainment with gender-critical messaging, fostering societal change through subtle, subversive storytelling. It would be valuable for further studies on the narrative roles of female characters in the history of Hong Kong comedy films, to explore evolving gender dynamics. Such research could ultimately contribute to promoting a stronger sense of gender equality among audiences.

References

- [1] Yeung, K. L. (Director). (1948). *The Judge Goes to Pieces* [Film]. Lianyi Film Production Company.
- [2] To, J. (Director). (1992). *Justice, My Foot!* [Film]. Cosmopolitan Film Production Co., Ltd.
- [3] Yu, M. W. (1998). *Hong Kong film history* (Vol. 3): The 1940s. pp. 144.
- [4] Lei, C. P. (2019). *Dream with the city: Anita Mui and Hong Kong popular culture*. Joint Publishing (Hong Kong). pp. 48–49, 57–58, 105–107.
- [5] Cheung, T., & Gilson, M. (2011) *Gender Trouble in Hongkong Cinema*. *Cinemas*, 3(2-3), Spring 1993. pp. 186.
- [6] Liu, N. (2001). Social gender: A central concept in Western feminist theory. *Social Sciences Abroad*, 6. pp.52.
- [7] Beauvoir, S. D. (2015) *The Second Sex* (Z. K. L. Trans.). [Shanghai Translation Publishing House]. pp. 11. (Original work published 1949)
- [8] DU, J. (2000) Feminism and Social Gender Analysis. *Journal of Sociological Research*, 15(3), 45–60.
- [9] Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and power: Society, the person and sexual politics*. Stanford University Press.
- [10] hooks, b. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. South End Press.
- [11] Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- [12] hooks, b. (2004). *The will to change: Men, masculinity, and love*. Washington Square Press.
- [13] Kimmel, M. S. (2008). *Guyland: The perilous world where boys become men*. Harper.