



# From Literary Breakthrough: The Relationship Between the Original and the Film Adaptation — The Case of Raise the Red Lantern

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**Abstract:** In the interactive relationship between literature and movie, adaptation has always been a field full of challenges and opportunities. The original work provides valuable materials for movie creation with its deep cultural heritage and rich emotional world, while the movie injects new life and vitality into the literary work with its unique audio-visual language and expressive methods. As a movie adapted from the novel *A Group of Wives and Concubines*, *Big Red Lanterns High Hanging* has not only achieved great success in the domestic and international movie world, but also provides an excellent case for people to study the relationship between the original novel and the movie adaptation. Based on this, this article studies the relationship between the original and the movie adaptation from the literary breakthrough: the relationship between the original and the movie adaptation--taking “Raise the Red Lantern” as an example for reference.

**Keywords:** literary wounds; original novel and film adaptation; relationship analysis; Raise the Red Lantern

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## 1. Introduction

Taking *Raise the Red Lantern* as an example, the complex relationship between the original novel and the film adaptation is studied in depth, especially analyzing this classic adaptation case from the perspective of literary breakthrough. By comparing the original novel “*Concubines and Wives*” with the movie directed by Zhang Yimou, it reveals how the movie successfully transforms the spiritual core and emotional tension of the literary work into a visual feast on the screen through the innovative use of visual, auditory and imagery symbols. At the same time, how to respect the original in the process of film adaptation, artistic re-creation, and realize the leap and integration between two art forms of literature and film. As an important way of literary breakthrough, its movie adaptation not only enriches the form of dissemination of literary works, but also provides a brand new aesthetic experience for the audience.

## 2. The Literary Appeal of the Original “Wives and Concubines

Su Tong’s original novel *The Wives and Concubines*, with its delicate strokes, draws a picture of a group of women in a deep house in the old times. The story is rooted in the feudal soil of the Republic of China, and the background of the era of male superiority and strict etiquette has laid a thick historical background for the novel. The novel profoundly explores the survival status and spiritual struggle of women under feudalism. In the intertwining of power and desire, they are either submissive and patient, or they fight hard, together weaving a sad song of women’s destiny. The core theme of *The Concubines* focuses on how women find their self-worth and dignity under the feudal yoke, showing their helplessness and awakening in front of the cruel reality. In the novel, the well and the wisteria frame become indispensable images. The well, deep and dark, seems to be a metaphor for women’s destiny, symbolizing endless loneliness and despair, as well as the inescapable cycle of destiny. The wisteria frame, on the other hand, maps out the fleeting beauty and hope in women’s lives with its gorgeous and short-lived flowers, adding a touch of color and warmth of life to this heavy subject matter. The skillful use of these images not only enriches the artistic expression of the novel, but also deepens the thematic meaning of the work [1].

## 3. Adaptation strategy of the movie *Raise the Red Lantern*

Director Zhang Yimou made an elaborate artistic re-creation when he adapted “*Wives and Concubines*” into the movie “*Raise the Red Lantern*”. He retained the core themes and character relationships of the original, while incorporating a unique visual style and symbolism. The director moved the story from the Jiangnan water town of the original to the more visually striking Shanxi compound, and strengthened the tragic color of women’s destiny under feudalism through the core imagery of the red lantern. In the film, the red lantern is not only a symbol of favor, but also a carrier of women’s desires and struggles. In addition, the director also uses a lot of color contrast and compositional techniques to create a depressing yet aesthetic atmosphere, which makes the film achieve artistic breakthrough and innovation on the basis of respecting the

spirit of the original.

The innovation point of the movie “Raise the Red Lantern” in the process of adaptation is mainly reflected in the conversion of the story background and the strengthening of the core imagery [2]. Zhang Yimou director will be the original of the Jiangnan water town of the soft background cleverly replaced by the ancient and solemn Qiao family compound in Shanxi, this geographic and cultural background changes, not only for the film to add a heavy sense of history, but also through the unique closed and oppressive atmosphere of the northern compound, a profound revelation of feudal rites of women’s constraints and destruction. The movie innovatively strengthens the use of red lanterns as the core imagery. In the original novel, the red lantern may be just a decoration, but in the movie, it becomes a visual mapping of women’s destiny and desires. Through the ceremonies of lighting and sealing the lanterns, the lighting of the red lanterns directly correlates with the favor and disfavor of the women, and becomes an important carrier of the film’s emotional tension.

#### **4. Artistic Value and Social Significance of Movie Adaptation**

The visual and aural artistic achievement of the movie “Raise the Red Lantern” is another masterpiece of director Zhang Yimou. On the visual side, the director’s use of color and composition reaches the point of perfection. The film is predominantly cold, using a lot of colors such as green-gray and black to create a depressing and closed atmosphere of a feudal family. In contrast, the red lanterns that appear frequently in the film not only light up the darkness and add vitality, but also symbolize women’s destiny and desires. Through subtle composition and color matching, the film successfully builds a visual world that is both real and symbolic. On the auditory side, the movie also shows remarkable artistic mastery. The soundtrack, dialog sound effects, and ambient sounds are carefully designed to add rich emotional layers to the film. Especially the use of background music not only echoes with the picture, but also independently undertakes the task of emotional expression [3]. Sometimes, the bleak opera chanting contrasts with the festive red lanterns, further emphasizing the tragic fate of the women; sometimes, the heavy footsteps intertwine with the silent courtyard, creating a suffocating and tense atmosphere. The skillful use of these sound elements makes the film achieve a high degree of audiovisual unity and harmony.

### **5. Comparative Analysis of the Original and the Movie Adaptation of Raise the Red Lantern**

#### **5.1 Adjustment of plot and structure**

The adjustments in plot and structure between the original “Wives and Concubines” and the movie “Raise the Red Lantern” show the different charms of the two art forms of literature and movies. The original movie builds complex character relationships and profound themes through delicate psychological descriptions and rich plotting. The movie, on the other hand, makes the story more compact and easier for the audience to accept by means of deletion and merging. In terms of plotting, the movie removes some minor episodes and characters in the original story and focuses on the main characters and core events. This kind of deletion not only makes the main story line clearer, but also speeds up the pace of the narrative, so that the audience can be immersed in the plot more quickly. At the same time, the movie also reduces redundancy by merging similar plots and scenes, making the story more coherent. The movie’s innovation in time division is also its success [4]. Through the four seasons of “summer”, “autumn”, “winter” and “the next summer”, the movie not only sets up a clear time frame for the story, but also gives the story a clear and coherent story. The movie not only sets a clear time frame for the story, but also gives these time nodes a deep symbolic meaning. The cycle of the four seasons symbolizes the helplessness of women’s destiny, and the changes of each season foreshadow the ups and downs of women’s destiny. This division of time not only enhances the hierarchy of the story, but also gives the audience a richer visual and emotional experience. Therefore, in the process of adapting the movie “Raise the Red Lantern”, by means of deleting and merging the plots as well as innovating the division of time, the movie has successfully made the story more compact and enhanced its symbolic significance, and become a movie work with unique artistic charm.

#### **5.2 Characterization of characters**

In the process of adapting the original “Wives and Concubines” and the movie “Raise the Red Lantern”, the characterization techniques show significant differences and commonalities. In the movie, the director profoundly strengthens the character traits and inner world of the main characters through the dual sensory stimulation of vision and hearing. In the original novel, the characters rely mainly on textual narration, and their complex personalities are shown through delicate psychological descriptions. The movie, on the other hand, makes use of multi-dimensional means such as superb performances by actors, scene layout, light and shadow effects and sound design to make the characters more three-dimensional and full. For example, Songlian’s change from her stubbornness and unwillingness when she first joined the Chen residence

to her gradual sinking into the struggle for favor is delicately presented by the movie through her change of costumes, facial expressions and interaction with the surrounding environment. On the basis of respecting the original, the movie enriches and develops the character. On the one hand, the movie retains the core character traits of the original characters, such as Songlian's frankness and stubbornness, Meishan's flamboyance and daring to love and hate, etc. On the other hand, the movie further strengthens these traits by adding visual and auditory elements, such as changes in light and darkness of the red lanterns, the sound of hammering feet, etc., so as to make the characters more distinctive and vivid. Therefore, in the process of adaptation, the movie "Raise the Red Lantern" not only respects the spiritual core of the original, but also enriches and develops the characters' images through unique artistic techniques, so as to make it more in line with the needs of expression of movie art [5].

### 5.3 Use of Imagery and Symbols

In the adaptations of the original "Wives and Concubines" and the movie "Raise the Red Lantern", the use of imagery and symbols becomes the key to artistic expression. In the movie, the red lantern is given the status of a central image, and its symbolism is far-reaching and rich. The red lantern becomes a symbol of women's destiny and desire. In the movie, the lighting and extinguishing of the red lanterns are directly related to women's favor and disfavor; the lit red lanterns mean favor and power, while the extinguished red lanterns symbolize coldness and marginalization. This symbolism deeply reveals the helplessness and sadness of women's destiny under feudalism, as well as their desire and pursuit of freedom and love. In contrast, the imagery of the well and the wisteria frame in the original novel is downplayed or reinterpreted in the movie. The well, as an ominous object, appears frequently in the original novel, symbolizing women's destiny and tragedy. However, in the movie, the imagery of the well is weakened and replaced by the strong visual impact of the red lantern. Natural scenery such as the wisteria frame is retained, but it is no longer the main symbol. The movie realizes an artistic breakthrough through the single imagery of the red lantern. Therefore, by contrasting the bright colors of the red lanterns with the cold tones of the surroundings, the film not only enhances the visual impact of the picture, but also deepens the thematic idea of the film. The successful use of this imagery makes the movie respect the spirit of the original, but also adds a unique artistic charm.

## 6. Conclusion

To sum up, as a successful film adaptation, Raise the Red Lantern not only faithfully retains the core spirit and emotional kernel of the original Wives and Concubines, but also realizes the transcendence and enrichment of the original through the innovative use of visual, auditory and imagery symbols. In the future, as technology continues to advance and art continues to develop, it is hoped that more literary works will maximize their artistic value through the medium of film, bringing audiences a more diverse and deeper aesthetic experience.

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