

Theoretical Text

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Abstract

Life Ring (《洄》) is a dance film that reveals the environment in which women grow up under traditional Chinese values and the intergenerational symbiotic strangulation within families. When “protection” becomes the rhetoric of confinement, and “filial reciprocity” turns into a new cycle of inherited control, can we truly escape the life ring we’ve long grown used to? —This is not a story of reconciliation, but a silent examination.

Keywords

Dance film, experimental theatre, intergenerational symbiotic strangulation, Chinese family, feminism

Introduction

Life Ring (《洄》) is a contemporary dance film rooted in the movement aesthetics of classical Chinese dance and has the potential for live performance in experimental theatre. Experimenting with restrictive props and physical dialogues in duets, the work deconstructs the phenomenon of intergenerational symbiotic strangulation faced by women in Chinese families—that is, power struggles in the name of “love” (Wu, 2016). By breaking down the imagery of the “white swan float”—a ring-shaped device of gentle confinement commonly used for life support, the piece attempts to expose how contemporary patriarchy disciplines

women in tender yet constraining ways, creating relationships of mutual dependence and mutual harm. The female subject undergoes self-tearing and completes reconstruction in the face of this entanglement, embodying both the protective confinement of a patriarchal society and women's traumatic growth from self-rupture.

Inspirations

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Intergenerational Transmission of Pathological Symbiosis

Zhi-Hong Wu's theory of "intergenerational symbiotic strangulation" posits that: "Chinese families exercise intergenerational control through emotional coercion, with children becoming objectified as 'psychological vessels' of their parents' self-extension" (Wu, 2016, p.112).

My research for this piece progressed in several phases. Initially, I had concerns for the lives of single women living alone around me, paying attention to their personal intentions, social norms, and a lack of institutional support. As I explored further into societal aesthetics and portrayals of women in mass media, I gradually became aware of the impassable gap between women and the notion of independence. In Chinese families deeply entrenched in collectivism, women do not receive the warmth of compassionate love, and their roles in the family lack individual subjectivity and selfhood. Instead, they are assigned roles such as mother, wife, or daughter. The tension between fulfilling familial expectations and realizing personal autonomy is nearly irreconcilable.

I then encountered Wu's theory, which illuminated a widespread pathology in Chinese family dynamics: a toxic symbiosis where parents, through emotional

binding and excessive control, view their children as extensions of themselves, demanding absolute obedience. Children, in turn, with prolonged repression of their authentic desires, are unable to develop independently or break free emotionally, creating a vicious cycle of interdependence and mutual harm. Hallmarks of this phenomenon include blurred boundaries, strong desire of controlling, emotional coercion, moral blackmail, and vicious cycle of intergenerational transmission.

This strangulation stems from a form of psychological “infantilization”—a collective fixation on the “symbiosis” and “omnipotent narcissism” of infancy. These adults yearn both to be cared for and to exert absolute control. Deprived of healthy intimacy models, their children often replicate these familial patterns in adulthood, perpetuating the cycle of symbiotic strangulation.

Finally, I found personal examples of these dynamics when studying the developmental trajectories and environments of women around me. My mother, emotionally numbed by abusive treatment from her father during childhood, unconsciously dissociated from her emotions and sense of self, resulting in an early suppression of her individuality. After marriage, she had a daughter and a son and became deeply entangled in their lives, always playing the role of the helper and sacrificer in the family. She felt regret for not having been able to become close to her father during her lifetime and exhausted every means medically possible to prolong his life when he was terminally ill. My own father is also very controlling, denied me the freedom to follow my own path as a child. I developed deep emotional dependency with my parents, and still struggle to reject their "resurrected" forceful love—knowing it's controlling, yet unable to clearly detach because “they love me anyway.” This intergenerational cycle of “affectionate violence” made me realize: although in modern days, daughters have escaped overt

gender discrimination from the Chinese traditions, they still grapple with intergenerational strangulation and legacy structures of the patriarchal society. Behind the façade of “gender equality,” daughters who are the only children or the eldest children are often treated as “emotional spouses” for their parents—becoming glue for the family system—yet without ever truly becoming women in their own right.

2.2 Artistic Context: Choreographic Innovation Through Restriction

The Mongolian duet *Old Goose* employs a reverse-flow psychological structure with imagery based on geese. The entire piece revolves around a bench as a prop, and spatial constraints push the choreographers to extremes of minimalistic expressiveness (Zhou, 2022). Within this restricted physical vocabulary, movements are simple and pure, replacing elaborate movement vocabulary and techniques with clear, distinct choreographic language. Through shifts in time and space and the interplay between the external world and the characters' inner realms, the work externalizes emotions by merging subject and object into a unified metaphor (Du, 2021).

In the solo piece *The Snail*, the dancer's interaction with a white cylinder forms a complete “human-object” movement system. Using minimal props and circular modern dance movements, the piece expresses both resistance and attachment (Peng, 2023). Movements between the dancer and the simple prop like pushing, being moved by, and chasing the cylinder reflect a dynamic balance of control and anti-control, which greatly inspired me. *Between Mountains and Waters* used the prop of a conical bamboo hat to form a visually harmonious duet, showing me new possibilities in duet and prop integration.

In terms of filming, J.H. Wang's dance film advertisement (director's cut) provided great inspiration in terms of lighting and spatial manipulation. Through precise control of brightness and shadow profiles in the studio, the film sometimes emphasizes facial expression, and other times the silhouette, enriching the unique expressive capabilities of dance film as a narrative medium.

Methodology

3.1 Experimental Design:

A white inflatable swan float is used as the core prop. Through the spatial relationship with the performers and the prop, and the movement vocabulary created between them, the play metaphorically represents family members' dependence on symbiotic relationships, the difficulties of separation, and the latent threat of strangulation violence. The swan float is at once a symbol of beauty, a metaphor for courage to fly freely, and a prison of patriarchal projection—this represents the father's protection and support for his daughter, as well as the inextricable symbiotic bond between them. The lack of autonomous subjectivity across generations allows this cycle to continue unchecked. Even the direction of the swan's head becomes a narrative tool.

3.2 Costume Design:

Minimalist black-and-white costumes symbolically strip performer identity, providing flexibility and imaginative space.

3.3 Sound Design: A Sonic Cage of Both Tenderness and Suffocation

- *Swan Lake (Suite), Op. 20a*: A slow-paced version of the classical symphony opens the film, matching the prop and subtly suggesting the harmony within traditional symbiosis and creating a tranquil atmosphere.
- *Solas*: A soft, fast-paced, and repetitive piano piece. Its opening high notes are like the sole glimmer of light visible from the ocean floor, followed by an endless descent and engulfment. The dusty piano unleashes a melody of liberation, as if a youth, destined for brilliance, longs for liberation from an increasingly neglected prison. The varied musical styles aptly complement the expressive needs of this segment of abstract painting.
- *The Coast No Man Can Tell*: With strong loneliness, this lyrical piece underscores the father watching his daughter drift away in the cycle of intergenerational symbiotic strangulation, with minimal choreography suitable for vocal music.

3.4 Choreography:

Based on contemporary dance, combined with Chinese classical dance and traditional ballet, the choreography expresses the tension between discipline and resistance while offering rich cultural symbols that spark imagination. Movements include both life-like gestures (e.g., flapping wings, a child growing taller) and abstract emotional expressions. The swan float enriches the movement vocabulary while also introducing choreographic constraints, prompting novel ideas of movements—though preceded by many failed attempts. The giant float is difficult to control; to manipulate it with grace demands both superior control capabilities and heightened skillfulness.

3.5 Cinematography:

Camera work breaks the boundaries of traditional stage performance. Moving

lenses create multiple perspectives and varying visual ranges, enriching the narrative. Light and shadow contribute to shifts in time and space.

3.6 Editing:

In addition to cinematography, editing techniques—modifying timecodes, adding keyframes, and using visual echoes—add expressive tension, narrative clarity, and richness of information. Realism is rejected in favor of a nonlinear temporal structure, allowing the audience to piece together the truth through fragmentation.

Results (and Discussion)

In the form of a dance film and experimental theater, *Life Ring* (《洄》) explores the strangling symbiosis of female growth and intergenerational relationships within the traditional Chinese family structure. Using the symbol of the “white swan float”, it reveals how patriarchal culture enacts subtle forms of discipline in the name of “protection”, locking women into cycles of dependence and bondage. Through a fusion of contemporary and classical Chinese dance, minimalist visual language, and nonlinear narrative, the work seeks to portray a family dynamic that is both intimate and violent, and asks: How can women undergo self-destruction and reconstruction within such entanglements?

Yet, the final piece leaves room for greater potential. Due to limited space and equipment, more complex lighting and shadow effects cannot be achieved, many planned lighting effects had to be cut, and complex camera positions could not be realized, reducing expressive richness. As an amateur dancer, and in my first duet collaboration, the movement vocabulary was limited and not fully realized in practice. Time constraints and a tight production schedule also meant the details were insufficiently refined. Perhaps this film can serve as a strong starting point for

continued exploration of the theme in future work—further refining its expressive techniques to create works that are more thought-provoking and emotionally resonant. We also intentionally preserved the continuity of conventional dance programs, allowing our work to be presented in physical theaters for live performances and engagement with the audience.

Video Link

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1PDtEh_lcd7V3fqDX9EGGYpLdoLFuX4Ds

References

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Appendix

Here is a detailed, objective summary of the 8 interviewed women, organized around the themes of "female autonomy" and "intergenerational transmission of trauma in Chinese families":

#1 (Maternal Grandmother)

Demographics:

- 76-year-old female
- Occupation: Retired accountant
- Marital status: Widowed (1 year)
- Living situation: Lives alone (briefly lived with daughter after back injury)
- Children: One son, one daughter

Family Dynamics:

- Husband: Successful but emotionally volatile; battled cancer for over 10 years
- Caregiving experience: Primary caregiver for husband until his death
- Intergenerational support: Played major role in raising grandchildren
- Living preferences: Insists on living independently; refuses to live with daughter
- Monitoring: Accepts home surveillance camera installed by daughter
- Ideal lifestyle: Wishes for a small garden to grow plants and take walks with friends

#2 (Mother)

Demographics:

- 49-year-old female
- Occupation: Accountant
- Marital status: In a "widowed marriage" (emotionally absent husband)
- Children: One son, one daughter

Background:

- Childhood: Experienced paternal violence
- Education: Athletic talent was suppressed by father
- Marriage: Arranged through relatives; first love
- Husband: Strong-willed and emotionally volatile; worked away from home for extended periods

Current Family Situation:

- Parenting: Highly invested in children's education
- Time management: Frequently says "no time now"
- Life planning: Postpones personal hobbies until retirement
- Children's health: Daughter has bipolar disorder and eating disorder

#3 (Great-Aunt)

Demographics:

- 60-year-old female
- Marital status: Widowed (23 years)
- Living situation: Lives with daughter's family
- Children: One daughter

Life Experience:

- Widowhood: Husband died of cancer when daughter was in middle school
- Parenting: Raised daughter alone through graduate school
- Daughter's education: Studied psychology
- Granddaughter: Age 7; helps care for her

Family Relationships:

- Daughter's marriage: Disapproves of son-in-law's appearance
- Relationship changes: Didn't speak for years; reconciled after daughter's pregnancy

#4 (Aunt Hua)

Demographics:

- 57-year-old female
- Marital status: Widowed (4 years)

- Living situation: Lives alone (for 1 year)

- Children: One son

Life Events:

- Widowhood: Husband committed suicide due to depression

- Caregiving: Cared for mother with ALS for 3 years

- Son: Doctor at West China Hospital; recently married

Family Dynamics:

- Views on #2: Critical of her care for dying father

- Personality: Strong-willed

#5 (Follower)

Demographics:

- 55-year-old female

- Marital status: Single, childless

- Living situation: Travels frequently

- Financial status: Comfortable

Lifestyle:

- Retirement: Has lived in Hangzhou, Dali, and Chengdu

- Social connections: Met interviewer through social media
- Elderly care: Open to retirement homes or home care

#6 (Paternal Grandma)

Demographics:

- 81-year-old female
- Education: Illiterate
- Marital status: Widowed (6 years)
- Living situation: Lives with second son
- Children: 6 (including stepson)

Life History:

- Marital history: Husband's second wife
- Life experience: Survived war
- Current outlook: Content with life; no specific plans

#7 号 (Youngest Aunt)

Demographics:

- 54-year-old female
- Marital status: Widowed (2 years)

- Children: One son (age 27)

Family Situation:

- Widowhood: Husband died of lung cancer
- Son: Middle school education; unstable employment
- Primary concern: Son's marriage prospects
- Past business: Ran a convenience store and mahjong parlor
- Regrets: Believes environment hindered son's development

#8 号 (Eldest Aunt)

Demographics:

- 63-year-old female
- Marital status: Divorced (27 years)
- Living situation: Lives with youngest son's family
- Mobility: Lost independence after failed back surgery

Life Story:

- Youth: Shanghai educated youth sent to countryside
- Marriage: Divorced after husband's affair
- Elderly care: Receives Shanghai home-care benefits

Intergenerational Patterns:

1. Occupational Inheritance:

- Accounting: #1 → #2
- Medicine: #4's son

2. Caregiving Models:

- Long-term: #1 (husband), #4 (mother)
- Short-term: #1 (post-injury)

3. Living Arrangements:

- Solo living: #1, #4, #5
- Multigenerational: #3, #6, #8

4. Educational Impact:

- Higher education: #3's daughter (graduate degree)
- Limited education: #7's son (middle school)

5. Health Patterns:

- Male health: Multiple husbands with serious illnesses (cancer, depression)
- Female role: Primary caregivers

6. Marriage Attitudes:

- Parental disapproval: #3 toward daughter's marriage
- Marital satisfaction: #6 had minimal emotional connection with husband

7. Intergenerational Support:

- Upward: #4 caring for mother

- Downward: #1 helping raise grandchildren

8. Trauma Transmission:

- Violence: #2's childhood

- Illness: Recurrent serious diseases across families

9. Autonomy Manifestations:

- Spatial: #1's insistence on independence

- Bodily: #2's daughter's eating disorder

- Lifestyle: #5's nomadic retirement

10. Societal Influences:

- Educated Youth Movement: #8

- Rural-to-urban shift: #6 → #8

*The preceding material has been systematically compiled from factual interview data using AI-assisted organization.