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Coping with Suffering and Constructing Subjectivity: A Comparative Study of Survival Strategies between Li Baoli in *Thousands of Arrows Piercing the Heart* and Antonia in *Antonia's Line*

Qinpei Fan

Department of Foundational Teaching, Shanghai Publishing and Printing College, Shanghai, China
Email: 39312543@qq.com

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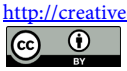

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Abstract

Taking feminist theory as the core framework, this study adopts text analysis, parallel comparison and cross-cultural comparative research methods to conduct a qualitative investigation of two female figures: Li Baoli from the Chinese film *Thousands of Arrows Piercing the Heart* and Antonia from the Dutch film *Antonia's Line*. Focusing on the dual dimensions of "coping with suffering" and "constructing subjectivity", this paper analyzes the "confrontational survival" and "constructive survival" strategies adopted by the two women respectively in the family field dominated by patriarchal discourse in China in the 1990s and the tolerant social context of the Netherlands after World War II, revealing the differences in paths for women to realize self-worth in different social structures. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's concept of "otherness" and feminist utopian theory, the study finds that Li Baoli's confrontation falls into a cycle of "individual breakthrough-external suppression" due to the lack of systematic support, as her subjectivity is perpetually confined by the "othering" of family ethics and patriarchal order. In contrast, Antonia transforms individual suffering into collective strength by establishing a women-led family community—an embodiment of feminist utopian practice—realizing the intergenerational transmission and utopian construction of subjectivity. The differences between them not only reflect the shaping of women's living space by Chinese and Western social cultures (while acknowledging intra-cultural diversity) but also provide a cross-cultural reference for understanding the diverse paths to women's subjectivity.

Subject Areas

Art

Keywords

Feminism, Suffering Coping, Subjectivity Construction, Survival Strategies, Individual Resistance, Collective Solidarity, Feminist Utopian Theory, Otherness

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Against the background of the continuous development of global feminist trends and the deepening of realistic literary and film creation, the living conditions and subjectivity construction paths of women facing suffering in different cultural contexts have become important topics in academic circles. The Chinese film *Thousands of Arrows Piercing the Heart* (adapted from the novel of the same name by Fang Fang) directed by Wang Jing and the Dutch film *Antonia's Line* directed by Marleen Gorris have shaped highly representative female figures—Li Baoli and Antonia—from unique narrative perspectives. Although the two works were created in different eras and social and cultural environments, they both focus on women's ways of coping with suffering under the dual pressures of family and society, providing typical texts for the study of cross-cultural women's survival strategies.

Thousands of Arrows Piercing the Heart is set in the period of China's social transformation in the 1990s and tells the tragic life of Li Baoli, an ordinary woman in Wuhan, who supports her family alone as a "porter" after her marriage breaks down and her husband commits suicide, but is eventually expelled by her son. *Antonia's Line*, on the other hand, takes the Dutch countryside in the 20th century as the stage and shows Antonia's life journey from returning to her hometown to establishing a family community spanning four generations of women, breaking gender shackles with tolerance and inheritance. The two works respectively present two distinct survival choices of women in suffering: "confrontation" and "construction". Behind this difference lies the profound impact of different social structures on the construction of women's subjectivity.

1.2. Research Significance

With the in-depth interpretation of concepts such as "subject consciousness" and "gender power" in feminist theory, academic research on female roles has shifted from a single "victim" narrative to the exploration of their "agency". However, existing studies mostly focus on the analysis of female figures in a single text or a single cultural context, such as discussions on Li Baoli's "resistance under patriarchal discourse" in *Thousands of Arrows Piercing the Heart* or interpretations of

"women's community" in *Antonia's Line*. There is a lack of systematic research that places the two in a cross-cultural framework for parallel comparison, making it difficult to reveal the correlation mechanism between differences in social structures and women's choices of survival strategies. For example, in existing studies, Wang Lijuan (2020) points out from a feminist perspective that Li Baoli's confrontation is restricted by the patriarchal order, and her subjectivity is in a contradictory state of "being bound-awakening" [1]. Huang Yueting (2018) argues that Antonia's family construction is a product of the combination of Dutch tolerant culture and feminism, with utopian attributes: "The family established by Antonia is a utopia for women. From Antonia to Sara, every woman has lived her own life." ([2]: p. 92) However, most of the existing achievements focus on a single text and lack a systematic cross-cultural comparison of their survival strategies, especially ignoring the impact of differences in social structures on the paths to women's subjectivity. Therefore, conducting a comparative study of Li Baoli's and Antonia's survival strategies based on text analysis, combined with cross-cultural comparison and feminist theory (including Beauvoir's "otherness" and feminist utopian thought), has important academic and practical significance.

The innovations of this study are as follows: Firstly, it breaks through the single cultural research framework and conducts a parallel comparison of the two women in different social contexts of China and the West, while acknowledging intra-cultural diversity to avoid cultural essentialism. Secondly, it constructs an analytical model of Suffering Coping-Subjectivity Construction and decomposes the specific practices of "confrontational" and "constructive" strategies through close text reading, integrating core feminist theories such as "otherness" and utopian theory. Thirdly, it explains the evolutionary logic of women's subjectivity from Individual Resistance to Collective Solidarity, and re-examines the complementary relationship between economic independence and narrative/ethical empowerment in women's liberation.

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Methods

2.1. Feminist Theory: The Core Perspective of Subjectivity Construction

In traditional ideologies, women are often attributed with traits such as gentleness, weakness, and dependence, confined to the domestic sphere, and tasked with the responsibilities of family care and childbearing. In contrast, men are assigned traits like courage, strength, and independence, and dominate the political and economic activities of society. Such rigid gender ideologies restrict women's development and consign them to a subordinate position in society.

The Second Sex (1949), written by the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, is a foundational work of modern feminism that explores the social, historical, and existential oppression of women. At the core of Beauvoir's thesis is the concept of "otherness": women have been defined not as independent individuals, but as the "second sex"—a counterpart to men, who are framed as the default or "norm".

This othering strips women of agency, confining them to roles like wife, mother, or caregiver, while limiting their access to education, careers, and public life. Beauvoir famously writes, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman [3]"—emphasizing that femininity is a social construct, not a biological destiny. For Beauvoir, freedom is the ultimate goal of feminism. To achieve freedom, women must break free from societal expectations that reduce them to objects of male desire or instruments of reproduction. This requires challenging patriarchal structures (e.g., unequal laws, restrictive gender norms) and claiming equal access to opportunities in work, education, and politics. However, "The Second Sex portends that such imagined freedom has not been actualized, thus the present remains circumscribed by power that subordinates the difference (s) in question" [4].

Complementing Beauvoir's theory, feminist utopian theory provides a critical lens for understanding Antonia's community construction. Utopian feminism, as articulated by scholars such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, advocates for the creation of alternative social structures that dismantle patriarchal oppression and prioritize equality, mutual support, and collective well-being. These utopian spaces serve not only as refuges from injustice but also as models for broader social transformation, demonstrating how gender relations can be reimagined beyond hierarchy and domination.

The core viewpoints of feminist theory revolve around gender equality, emphasizing that women and men should enjoy equal rights and opportunities in social, political, economic, and other spheres. It critiques traditional gender ideologies, arguing that these ideologies are the product of social construction rather than being based on biological sex differences.

Feminist theory also focuses on gendered power relations, pointing out that in a patriarchal society, men hold primary power, while women are subjected to oppression and marginalization. In the field of literary studies, feminist theory enables researchers to examine the gender consciousness and gendered power relations embedded in literary works from a gender perspective. Through the analysis of literary works, we can reveal how traditional gender ideologies shape and constrain female images, as well as the living conditions and resistance consciousness of women depicted in these works—particularly how "otherness" operates to limit women's subjectivity and how utopian practices can challenge such constraints.

2.2. Research Methods: Integration of Text Analysis, Parallel Comparison, and Cross-Cultural Comparison

This study adopts three research methods:

Firstly, text analysis is one of the important methods of this study. By conducting a detailed interpretation of the film texts of *Thousands of Arrows Piercing the Heart* and *Antonia's Line*, including the analysis of plot, character dialogue, images, and symbolic symbols (such as Li Baoli's "shoulder pole" and Antonia's "farm"), this study deeply explores the implied women's survival strategies and gender consciousness. Analyzing the language style and expression of Li Baoli's

dialogues with her family, as well as the conflict scenes between her and family or social rules (such as reporting her husband's infidelity and confronting her son), can reflect her personality traits and attitude towards life, while linking her struggles to Beauvoir's concept of "otherness". Through the analysis of key events in Antonia's establishment of a family community (such as adopting orphans and supporting women's independent choices) and the images of her family life scenes, the mutual assistance and support among women can be felt, with reference to feminist utopian theory to frame this community as a transformative space.

Secondly, cross-cultural comparison method. Combining the social background of "the reform of the state-owned enterprise system" in China in the 1990s and "the reconstruction of family status" [5], and the cultural context of "the end of religious pillarization" and "the rise of secularization" ([2]: p. 91) in the Netherlands after World War II, this study analyzes the shaping mechanism of social structure on survival strategies. It focuses on the differences in social structures between China and the Netherlands, such as the social mobility after the disintegration of the "unit system" in China in the 1990s, the impact of traditional family ethics ("filial piety culture, male superiority over female") on Li Baoli, and the impact and support of the Dutch social welfare system, relatively open gender concepts, and individualism in Western culture on Antonia during the same period. Importantly, this study avoids presenting these social contexts as monolithic: it acknowledges that 1990s China included urban, educated women with greater access to resources, while the Netherlands had working-class and immigrant women whose experiences diverged from Antonia's. Cross-cultural comparison can thus reveal the differences in women's survival in different cultural backgrounds without resorting to cultural essentialism.

Thirdly, parallel comparison method. With "Sources of Sufferings", "Core of Survival Strategy", "Expression of Subjectivity", "Social Support" and "Outcome" as the core dimensions, this study conducts a one-to-one comparative analysis of Li Baoli's and Antonia's survival strategies to clarify their differences and commonalities. This dual comparison method can not only highlight the commonalities of women in the two films, such as their tenacity and courage in the face of suffering, but also reveal the impact of cultural differences on women's choices. At the same time, it can avoid the trap of cultural essentialism in cross-cultural research and ensure the objectivity and systematicness of the comparison.

3. Sources of Suffering: Dual Shaping of Social Structure and Individual Circumstances

3.1. Li Baoli's Suffering: Dual Suppression of Patriarchal Order and Family Ethics—Exacerbated by 1990s Social Transformation

Li Baoli grew up in the marketplaces of Wuhan. She dropped out of primary school to help her family sell vegetables and later became an ordinary vendor in Han Street, working as a salesperson at a sock stall. Her toughness is vividly dis-

played in the film. In the moving scene, facing the movers who raised the price arbitrarily, she showed no fear, put her hands on her hips and yelled at them. Her series of Wuhan dialects, as sharp as a machine gun, left no room for the other party to retort, fully showing her fiery temper. Her toughness is not unprovoked. In the bottom-level society where the law of the jungle prevails, she must protect herself and her family with a tough attitude to survive in the cracks of life. Li Baoli also has extraordinary perseverance. After her husband Ma Xuewu had an affair and committed suicide, she took on the heavy burden of the family alone. She not only had to bear huge economic pressure but also face the misunderstanding and resentment of her mother-in-law and son. She chose to become a "porter" and made a living by doing coolie work to support the family. Whether it was scorching sun or bitter cold wind, she could be seen carrying a shoulder pole and shuttling through the streets and alleys. Her perseverance is reflected not only in material support but also in spiritual tenacity. In the face of heavy blows in life, she never had the idea of giving up and always persisted.

Li Baoli's suffering stems from the strengthening of the patriarchal order in the family field during China's social transformation in the 1990s, and the causal mechanism linking this transformation to intensified gender oppression lies in the collapse of the "unit system". Prior to the 1990s, the unit system provided a degree of economic security and social support for urban families, with state-owned enterprises offering housing, healthcare, and welfare that mitigated the dominance of patriarchal family structures. However, the reform of state-owned enterprises and the disintegration of the unit system in the 1990s led to the loss of this collective safety net. For families like Li Baoli's, economic stability became contingent on individual male breadwinners—her husband Ma Xuewu's position as a director of a state-owned enterprise factory office became the sole symbol of family power and security. In contrast, Li Baoli's occupational identity as a "vendor" was labeled as "bottom-level" and "uneducated", placing her in a subordinate position. This class-gender intersection intensified patriarchal oppression in the domestic sphere: with the state no longer mediating family power dynamics, the patriarchal order reasserted itself through the male breadwinner model, depriving women of economic autonomy and voice. Ma Xuewu's actions such as filing for divorce and taking his mother to live with them without permission are essentially the deprivation of women's right to speak by the patriarchal order—Li Baoli's resistance (such as crying and compromising) always stays at the level of individual emotions and fails to touch the core of the power structure, as she is trapped in Beauvoir's "otherness": defined not as an independent individual, but as a wife and mother whose value is derived from her service to men.

From the perspective of individual circumstances, Li Baoli's suffering has the characteristics of a "family closed loop": after her husband's infidelity, she chose to call the police instead of getting a divorce, trying to maintain the integrity of the family by "punishing her husband", but this intensified the breakdown of the marriage. After her husband's suicide, she took on the dual roles of "mother" and

"daughter-in-law" and supported the family through manual labor as a "porter", but was regarded as a "father-killer" by her son Xiao Bao. The construction of women's subjectivity in China in the 1990s was still restricted by the traditional expectation of virtuous wife and good mother—an expectation that embodies Beauvoir's "otherness", as women are reduced to relational roles rather than autonomous subjects. The more intense Li Baoli's confrontation was, the more likely she was to be defined as an unqualified woman by family ethics, reinforcing her status as the "other".

From the perspective of family ethics, Li Baoli's suffering is further intensified by the traditional expectation of virtuous wife and good mother in Chinese culture. After Ma Xuewu's suicide, the family (especially her mother-in-law and son) transferred their grief and anger to Li Baoli, accusing her of being a "husband-killer" who destroyed the family. This accusation ignores Li Baoli's efforts to support the family and instead judges her based on the patriarchal standard of "a woman should maintain family harmony at all costs". During China's 1990s social transformation, family ethics became a tool to constrain women's subjectivity: while men were allowed to pursue "career success" as a way to realize their value, women were still confined to the family and required to sacrifice their own needs for the sake of their husbands and children. Li Baoli's choice to work as a porter—an act of economic independence—was not recognized as a sign of responsibility but rather criticized as "abandoning her maternal duty" (e.g., her son Xiao Bao complained that she "never had time to cook for him"). This double standard reflects the inherent contradiction of family ethics in the patriarchal system: it demands women's sacrifice but denies their right to self-realization, further entrenching their "otherness".

Another manifestation of Li Baoli's suffering is the isolation of resistance caused by the lack of collective support. Unlike Antonia, who can rely on a women's community, Li Baoli's resistance is purely individual. She has few female friends to share her hardships with, and her relationship with other female porters is limited to "competitors" (e.g., they fight for customers and raise prices secretly). This isolation makes her unable to transform individual suffering into collective strength. For example, when Li Baoli is harassed by male customers while working as a porter, she can only fight back alone; she has no way to unite other female porters to resist gender-based violence, nor can she appeal to any social organization for help. Thus, without the right to political participation or social support, individual resistance to suffering will inevitably fall into a cycle of breakthrough and suppression—compounded by the "othering" that frames her resistance as irrational or unruly.

3.2. Antonia's Suffering: Individual Trauma and the Possibility of Collective Healing—Within a Tolerant, Secularized Context

Unlike Li Baoli's suffering, which is rooted in the dual suppression of patriarchal order and family ethics, Antonia's suffering presents the characteristics of "individual trauma amid collective tolerance"—shaped by the post-World War II

Dutch social context of secularization and religious reconciliation. It is important to note that this Dutch context is not monolithic: Antonia's experience as a middle-class rural woman differs from that of working-class or immigrant Dutch women, who may have faced greater economic precarity or cultural marginalization. Nevertheless, the broader social shifts of post-war secularization created a space for her unique coping strategy.

Antonia's life journey begins with "escaping trauma": after the war, she returns to her hometown in the Dutch countryside with her daughter Daniëlle, fleeing the psychological scars left by the Nazi occupation (e.g., the death of her father in a concentration camp). This personal trauma is not an isolated case but a shared memory of the Dutch people after the war; however, unlike the collective trauma in other war-torn regions, the Netherlands' unique process of secularization and reconciliation provides a social environment for transforming individual trauma into collective healing.

From the perspective of social structure, the end of "religious pillarization" in the Netherlands after World War II is a key factor shaping Antonia's suffering and coping strategies. Before the war, the Netherlands was divided into three "pillars" (Catholic, Protestant, and secular) that operated independently in education, media, and social life, leading to long-term religious conflicts. After the war, the Dutch government promoted secularization reforms, dismantling the pillar system and encouraging religious and cultural tolerance. This social change weakened the religious constraints on gender roles—for example, Catholic teachings that "women should obey their husbands and prioritize childbearing" were no longer the dominant social norm. As a result, Antonia, as an unmarried mother, did not face the same moral condemnation as Li Baoli; instead, she was able to raise her daughter openly and establish a non-traditional family community—one that aligns with feminist utopian ideals of alternative social organization.

Antonia's individual suffering mainly stems from two sources: the trauma of war and the occasional gender-based violence in daily life. The war trauma is reflected in her memory of her father's death and her compassion for other war victims—for example, she takes in "Madonna the Lunatic", a woman who lost her mind after her family was killed by the Nazis. This compassion is not just personal sympathy but a reflection of the Dutch people's collective response to war trauma: instead of ignoring or suppressing trauma, they choose to face it through mutual assistance. The gender-based violence Antonia faces is mainly from Piete, a local farmer who rapes her sister-in-law. Unlike Li Baoli, who can only resist alone, Antonia responds to this violence through collective action: she unites the women in the community to drive Piete out of the village, and later, when Piete returns to take revenge, the community collectively protects Antonia and her family. Fortunately, the community recognizes the harm of gender-based violence and takes action to defend women's dignity, rather than blaming the victim—rejecting the "othering" that would frame the survivor as complicit.

Another important feature of Antonia's suffering is that she transforms individual trauma into a driving force for collective solidarity—embodying feminist

utopian theory's emphasis on collective well-being. Feminist utopias are not just idealized spaces but active projects of resistance, where marginalized groups build alternatives to oppressive structures. Antonia's community is precisely such a project: it rejects patriarchal hierarchy, prioritizes mutual support, and redefines gender roles beyond domination and submission. For example, after Madonna the Lunatic dies of depression, Antonia establishes a "memory garden" in her honor, where the community members gather to share stories of their loved ones lost in the war. This act of "collective memory construction" not only heals Antonia's own trauma but also strengthens the bond between community members. A collective narrative can reframe individual pain as a shared experience, turning powerlessness into a foundation for collective resistance. She recognizes that her own healing is inseparable from the healing of others, so she actively helps marginalized groups (such as the mentally challenged child Didi and the unwed mother Rata) to integrate into the community. In this process, Antonia's subjectivity is no longer limited to individual survival but expands to the construction of a more inclusive and just collective life—fulfilling the utopian goal of transforming both self and society.

The difference between Antonia's and Li Baoli's suffering is not only a matter of individual choice but also a product of different social structures. In the Netherlands' tolerant and secularized social context, Antonia can rely on community support to cope with suffering and construct her subjectivity; while in China's 1990s patriarchal family ethics and market-oriented social transformation, Li Baoli's individual resistance is destined to be isolated and suppressed. This difference does not mean that one social context is "better" than the other, but rather reveals the diversity of women's living conditions in different cultural backgrounds—and this diversity is exactly the core issue that cross-cultural feminist research needs to pay attention to, while acknowledging the intra-cultural variations within each context.

4. Survival Strategies and Subjectivity Construction: A Comparative Analysis of Li Baoli and Antonia

The construction of female subjectivity amid suffering has long been a central concern in feminist scholarship, which rejects the essentialist portrayal of women as "passive victims" and instead emphasizes the dynamic interaction between structural oppression and active resistance. Alyson M. Cole argues that: "Feminists have struggled with the tension between defining women's sufferings and working for women's liberation throughout most of the modern movement…Women's liberation can be neither properly conceived nor actualized if women are considered nothing more than victims." [6]

4.1. Li Baoli's "Confrontational Survival": Individual Resistance and the Limitation of Subjectivity—Trapped by "Otherness"

Li Baoli's survival strategy can be defined as "confrontational survival"—characterized by individual resistance to economic oppression and family constraints,

but limited by the lack of collective support and systematic change, as well as her entanglement in Beauvoir's "otherness". This strategy is mainly reflected in two aspects: economic independence through manual labor and emotional resistance to family unfairness.

In terms of economic independence, Li Baoli's choice to work as a porter is a direct response to economic oppression. After Ma Xuewu's death, the family lost its main source of income, and Li Baoli, as a "vendor" with no formal education, had few employment options. However, she refused to rely on social relief or family assistance and instead chose a job that was physically demanding and traditionally dominated by men. This choice reflects her desire for distributive justice—by earning money through her own labor, she tries to break free from economic dependence on men and gain the right to speak in the family. However, this form of economic independence has obvious limitations, compounded by the "othering" of patriarchal discourse: the low income of a porter can only meet the basic needs of the family, and the physical exhaustion it brings leaves Li Baoli no time or energy to pursue other forms of self-realization (such as learning new skills or participating in social activities). Moreover, her economic contribution is not recognized by the family—her mother-in-law still thinks she "should stay at home and take care of the children", and her son regards her work as "embarrassing." This lack of recognition justice stems from the patriarchal framing of women as "others" whose labor is only valuable if it serves the family's patriarchal interests. Thus, economic independence alone cannot achieve true gender equality—without recognition justice (the recognition of women's labor value) and freedom from "otherness", economic autonomy can only be a temporary solution rather than a long-term path to subjectivity.

Li Baoli's emotional resistance to family unfairness is another manifestation of her "confrontational survival" strategy. For example, when her mother-in-law blames her for Ma Xuewu's death, she argues loudly that "I didn't force him to commit suicide"; when her son refuses to talk to her, she breaks down and cries, questioning "what did I do wrong?" However, this kind of resistance is limited to emotional outbursts and lacks rational planning and collective support. More importantly, it is framed by "otherness": her anger is dismissed as the irrationality of a "difficult woman", and her grief is seen as a failure to fulfill her role as a wife and mother. Individual emotional resistance cannot challenge the structural roots of suffering—it can only temporarily alleviate personal anger but cannot change the patriarchal order that causes suffering. For instance, Li Baoli's quarrel with her mother-in-law does not change the latter's prejudice against her; instead, it makes her son more alienated from her. This result shows that without transforming individual suffering into collective narrative, emotional resistance will only reinforce the label of "unreasonable woman" and further restrict the construction of subjectivity—trapping her deeper in the "other" category.

The limitation of Li Baoli's subjectivity is also reflected in her internalization of patriarchal norms despite her resistance—another manifestation of "otherness". Beauvoir argues that women often internalize the "other" identity, accepting their

subordinate status as natural. Li Baoli embodies this: she has always hoped that her son Xiao Bao will "become a man" and "take care of the family" when he grows up—this expectation is consistent with the patriarchal view that "men should be the head of the family". Even when she is expelled by her son, she still insists on giving him the money she saved, saying "this is for your future". This kind of self-sacrifice reflects Li Baoli's internalization of patriarchal family ethics: she regards her son's success as the ultimate realization of her own value, rather than pursuing her own happiness and dignity. This kind of self-sacrifice ethics is a tool of patriarchal oppression—it demands that women prioritize others' needs over their own, thereby depriving them of the right to construct independent subjectivity. Li Baoli's tragedy lies in this contradiction: she resists patriarchal oppression through individual struggle, but at the same time, she is bound by patriarchal norms and "otherness", unable to realize the true liberation of subjectivity.

4.2 Antonia's "Constructive Survival": Collective Solidarity and the Intergenerational Transmission of Subjectivity—A Feminist Utopian Project

A critical dimension of Antonia's subjectivity construction lies in her rejection of "victimhood" and her redefinition of women's roles beyond patriarchal constraints—directly challenging Beauvoir's "otherness" by asserting women's autonomy as subjects. Unlike Li Baoli, who is often framed as a tragic victim by her social context, Antonia actively reshapes the narrative around women's suffering. For instance, when Rata, an unwed mother in the community, faces societal pressure to abandon her child, Antonia publicly defends her choice, stating, "A woman's worth is not measured by her marital status or her obedience to men". This statement directly challenges the patriarchal discourse that links female value to domesticity and male approval—a discourse that traps Li Baoli in a cycle of self-doubt and "otherness".

Antonia's ability to redefine narrative emphasizes the power of storytelling to reconstruct reality—an essential element of feminist utopian practice, which seeks to imagine and build alternative worlds through collective narrative. By sharing stories of women's resilience (e.g., her mother's struggle to raise her alone, Madonna the Lunatic's quiet courage), Antonia creates a collective narrative that centers women's agency rather than their suffering. This narrative becomes a tool for empowering other community members: Didi, once a shy and isolated child, begins to speak up for himself after hearing stories of marginalized people who overcame adversity; Rata gains the confidence to pursue education and become a teacher, breaking the cycle of poverty for her family. In this way, narrative empowerment complements economic independence—together, they create a foundation for genuine subjectivity.

Moreover, Antonia's community serves as a microcosm of gender equality that prefigures broader social change—embodying the core tenets of feminist utopian theory. Feminist utopias are not escapist fantasies but practical experiments in alternative social organization, and Antonia's farm is precisely such an experi-

ment. Representational justice requires not only formal political rights but also the creation of alternative spaces where marginalized groups can practice self-governance. Antonia's farm, with its shared labor, equal decision-making, and rejection of gendered division of work (e.g., men in the community help with cooking and childcare, while women manage the farm's finances), embodies this idea. It demonstrates that a more equitable social order is possible—an idea that inspires Daniëlle and Therèse to advocate for women's rights beyond the community, such as supporting local policies to end gender-based violence. This utopian construction is not static; it evolves through intergenerational transmission, as each new generation of women builds on Antonia's vision while adapting it to their own needs.

In contrast to Li Baoli's static subjectivity, which remains confined to survival, Antonia's subjectivity evolves from "individual resilience" to "collective leadership." In her old age, when the community faces a drought that threatens their crops, Antonia does not take sole control but organizes a "collective problem-solving council" where every member—including children and the elderly—contributes ideas. This act of shared leadership reflects relational ethics, as Antonia recognizes that her own authority stems not from her individual power but from the trust and solidarity of the group. By the end of the film, Antonia's subjectivity is no longer tied to her personal story but to the legacy of the community she built—a legacy that ensures women's agency will continue to thrive long after her death. This intergenerational transmission of subjectivity is a hallmark of feminist utopian success: it creates a sustainable model of resistance that outlives the individual, transforming temporary solidarity into a lasting social structure.

4.3. Core Dimension Comparison: Differences in Survival Strategies between Li Baoli and Antonia

The following comparison Table 1 can clearly present the differences between the two survival strategies:

Table 1. Differences in survival strategies between Li Baoli and Antonia.

Comparison Dimensions	Li Baoli (from *Thousands of Arrows Piercing the Heart*)	Antonia (from *Antonia's Line*)
Sources of Suffering	Oppression from family ethics (husband's infidelity, son's hatred, mother-in-law's indifference); economic difficulties; social evaluation system dominated by patriarchal discourse (Beauvoir's "otherness"). Exacerbated by the collapse of the unit system in 1990s China, which intensified patriarchal power in the family.	War trauma (individual psychological trauma); survival predicaments of socially marginalized groups; residual issues from religious belief conflicts. Mitigated by post-WWII Dutch secularization and tolerance, which weakened patriarchal constraints.
Core of Survival Strategy	Individual resistance: Coping with external pressures through physical labor and emotional rebellion, lacking systematic support. Trapped in the cycle of "individual breakthrough-external suppression" due to "otherness".	Group construction: Establishing a female-led family community (feminist utopian practice), integrating individual strengths, and passing on female values. Transforming individual trauma into collective solidarity.

Continued

Expression of Subjectivity	Passivity: Subjectivity is always constrained by family ethics and patriarchal order, and value is defined by others (e.g., "dominant wife", "incompetent mother")—embodying Beauvoir's "otherness".	Initiative: Defining female values through community construction and narrative empowerment, realizing the intergenerational transmission of subjectivity (e.g., Danielle's artistic pursuit, Theresa's intellectual awakening). Rejecting "otherness" by asserting women's autonomy as subjects.
Social Support	None: The social context (China in the 1990s) reinforced the patriarchal order, lacking support for women's independence. Intra-cultural variations (e.g., urban educated women) did not benefit Li Baoli as a working-class rural migrant.	Yes: The tolerant culture and secularization process in the Netherlands provided living space for the female community, and society had a high acceptance of diverse lifestyles. Acknowledging intra-cultural diversity (e.g., working-class/immigrant women's experiences) does not diminish the community's utopian potential.
Outcome	Failure: Expelled from the family, subjectivity completely suppressed, falling into a predicament of homelessness. Economic independence alone, without recognition justice or collective support, fails to challenge "otherness".	Success: Establishing a female utopia spanning four generations, subjectivity continued through descendants, and achieved the value unification of "individual-group". Economic independence combined with narrative/ethical empowerment and collective solidarity enables sustained subjectivity construction.

5. Research Findings and Discussion

5.1. Core Findings: Differences in Subjectivity Construction Paths

This study's comparative analysis reveals three key differences in how Li Baoli and Antonia construct subjectivity amid suffering, shaped by their respective social contexts and survival strategies:

Individual vs. Collective Resistance: Li Baoli's "confrontational survival" relies on individual action (e.g., manual labor, emotional outbursts) that fails to challenge the structural roots of her suffering. Trapped in Beauvoir's "otherness", her resistance is easily dismissed as "unreasonable" or "desperate" by patriarchal discourse. Without collective support or alternative narratives, she cannot transform her individual struggle into systemic change. In contrast, Antonia's "constructive survival" uses collective solidarity to transform both individual suffering and the systems that cause it. Her community—rooted in feminist utopian theory—provides not only practical support (e.g., financial help, protection from violence) but also a platform for collective resistance and narrative redefinition, ensuring that women's voices are heard and their rights are defended. This collective approach breaks free from "otherness" by framing women as active subjects rather than passive objects.

Economic Independence and Narrative/Ethical Empowerment: Complementary, Not Oppositional: Li Baoli's pursuit of distributive justice through economic independence is a necessary but insufficient step toward subjectivity. Her labor is devalued by her family and society due to "otherness", and she lacks the recognition justice and narrative empowerment that would validate her contributions. Antonia, by contrast, demonstrates that economic self-sufficiency (the farm provides for the community's needs) and collective storytelling/relational ethics are

complementary and mutually necessary for liberation. Economic independence provides the material foundation for autonomy, while narrative empowerment challenges the "othering" that devalues women's labor and agency. Together, they create a holistic path to subjectivity that addresses both material and ideological oppression—proving that liberation cannot be achieved through economic independence alone, nor through narrative change without material security.

Stagnant vs. Evolving Subjectivity: Li Baoli's subjectivity remains stagnant because she is trapped in a cycle of "reaction"—she responds to crises (her husband's infidelity, her son's rejection) but never gains the agency to define her own goals or values. Her internalization of patriarchal norms (e.g., prioritizing her son's happiness over her own) further limits her growth, as she accepts the "other" identity. Antonia's subjectivity, however, evolves dynamically: she starts as a woman fleeing trauma, becomes a community builder, and eventually emerges as a leader whose legacy shapes future generations. Her ability to adapt and grow reflects the flexibility of subjectivity when supported by collective solidarity, a clear vision of justice (utopian practice), and the integration of economic and narrative empowerment. Her subjectivity is not static but relational, expanding through her connections to the community and future generations.

5.2. Discussion: The Role of Social Structure in Subjectivity Construction

The differences between Li Baoli and Antonia highlight the profound impact of social structure on women's ability to construct subjectivity. For Li Baoli, the 1990s Chinese context—marked by the collapse of the unit system, the re-entrenchment of patriarchal family ethics, and the lack of social support for women's independence—created a structural environment where individual resistance was destined to fail. The patriarchal discourse's "othering" of women as relational beings rather than autonomous subjects further constrained her, as her economic contributions and resistance were dismissed as irrational or unruly. In such a context, even acts of courage and perseverance could not break free from the systemic oppression that defined her worth through her service to men.

For Antonia, the post-WWII Dutch context—characterized by secularization, religious tolerance, and a willingness to rebuild social structures after war trauma—provided a fertile ground for collective resistance and utopian construction. The end of religious pillarization weakened patriarchal norms that confined women to traditional roles, allowing Antonia to establish a non-traditional family community. This social context did not eliminate suffering (e.g., war trauma, gender-based violence) but provided the space for women to respond collectively, transforming individual pain into solidarity. Importantly, this context is not idealized—intra-cultural variations mean that not all Dutch women benefited equally—but it demonstrates how social structures that prioritize tolerance and equality can enable women's agency.

The key insight here is that women's subjectivity construction is not a purely

individual project but a dynamic interaction between personal choice and social structure. Structural factors (e.g., social welfare systems, gender norms, cultural values) shape the resources available to women (e.g., collective support, economic opportunities, narrative power), while individual choices (e.g., resistance vs. community building) respond to and sometimes challenge these structures. Antonia's success is not just a result of her individual courage but of her ability to leverage a supportive social context to build a utopian community, while Li Baoli's tragedy is not a failure of character but a reflection of a social order that denies women the resources and recognition they need to thrive.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study has two main limitations. First, it focuses on two film texts, which are artistic representations rather than direct reflections of reality. While films can illuminate social trends, they may simplify complex experiences (e.g., Li Baoli's suffering is exaggerated for dramatic effect, Antonia's community is idealized as a utopia). Future research could complement this analysis with interviews or ethnographic studies of real women in China and the Netherlands, to explore how subjectivity construction plays out in everyday life—particularly how working-class, immigrant, or rural women navigate the intersection of gender, class, and culture.

Second, while this study acknowledges intra-cultural diversity, it could further elaborate on how factors such as class, education, and rural/urban status shape women's survival strategies within China and the Netherlands. For example, urban, educated women in 1990s China may have had access to more social support and economic opportunities than Li Baoli, while Dutch women from immigrant backgrounds may have faced additional barriers to community building that Antonia did not. Future research could explore these intra-cultural variations in depth, to develop a more nuanced understanding of how social structure interacts with other identity markers to shape women's subjectivity.

Additionally, future research could expand the comparative framework to include more diverse cultural contexts, to test whether the complementary relationship between economic independence and narrative/ethical empowerment holds across different societies. It could also explore how contemporary social changes (e.g., globalization, digital media, feminist activism) are transforming women's survival strategies and subjectivity construction, building on the insights of this study to inform ongoing efforts for gender equality.

6. Conclusions

This study's comparative analysis of Li Baoli and Antonia reveals that women's subjectivity construction amid suffering is not a purely individual process but a dynamic interaction between personal choice and social structure. Li Baoli's "confrontational survival" highlights the limitations of individual resistance in a context where patriarchal norms are deeply entrenched, social support is lacking, and

"otherness" defines women's value through their relational roles. Her tragedy is not a failure of character but a reflection of a social order that denies women the resources, recognition, and collective solidarity needed to thrive—demonstrating that economic independence alone cannot liberate women from systemic oppression.

Antonia's "constructive survival", by contrast, demonstrates the transformative power of collective solidarity, feminist utopian practice, and the complementary nature of economic and narrative empowerment. Her community, built on the principles of justice, tolerance, and mutual support, provides a model for how women can redefine their roles and resist oppression—rejecting "otherness" and asserting their autonomy as subjects. While her experience is shaped by a specific cultural context (post-WWII Dutch secularization), her core insight—that women's liberation is collective, not individual, and requires both material security and ideological change—has universal relevance.

Ultimately, this study contributes to feminist scholarship by emphasizing the need to move beyond "one-size-fits-all" narratives of women's empowerment. It shows that there is no single path to subjectivity; instead, women's strategies are shaped by their unique social contexts, and effective support for women must be contextually sensitive. For Li Baoli and women like her, this means challenging patriarchal family ethics, building strong community networks, and advocating for recognition of women's labor value—addressing both material and ideological oppression. For Antonia and her community, it means protecting the spaces of equality they have created and expanding them to include more marginalized groups, ensuring that utopian practice remains inclusive and responsive to diverse needs.

In a world where women still face systemic oppression, the stories of Li Baoli and Antonia remind us that resistance takes many forms—and that every act of courage, whether individual or collective, is a step toward a more just and equitable future. By understanding the role of social structure, collective solidarity, and the complementary nature of economic and narrative empowerment, we can better support women's struggles for subjectivity and liberation across different cultural contexts.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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