"FAMILY" AS A SITE OF GENDER AND CLASS STRUGGLES IN CATHERINE LIM'S THE SONG OF SILVER FROND

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ABSTRACT

"Family" in The Song of Silver Frond (TSOSF) functions as a site of gender and class struggles to challenge the Chinese yin-yang and nei-wai tradition. Continuities and transformations in Chinese familial practices result from complex socio-cultural-generational dynamics. "Family" becomes a battleground of gender and class struggles for the preservation and transformation of those familial traditions. Moreover, the dynamic of ethnicity also intersects with gender and class relations. The traditional Chinese familial practices follow two fundamental Confucian gender foundations: yin-yang and nei-wai. The yin-yang delineation privileges man versus woman. Meanwhile, the private/public distinction of nei-wai relegates the woman's place to the domestic sphere. By employing Post-Structural feminist perspectives focusing on gender intersectionality, this article examines how "family" becomes the site of ethnic-gender-class struggles in TSOSF. The articles revealed that some family members, both men, and women, continue to apply the traditional Confucian rules from generation to generation. However, other members challenge those traditional practices to contest gender and class inequalities to adapt to different sociocultural dynamics in Southeast Asian Society. Thus, this article has articulated the way TSOSF displays "family" as a site of gender and class struggle in Chinese familial practices.

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A. Introduction

The general argument of this article is that in Catherine Lim's novel *The Song of Silver Frond* (*TSOSF*), the patriarchal discourse of "family" is interrogated and problematized. In particular, *TSOSF* challenges the patriarchal discourse of "family" in its "Eastern" specificity based on

the official Confucian foundation of *yin-yang* and *nei-wai.* Accordingly, the challenge to this patriarchal discourse is posited in this article by showing how *TSOSF* contests the boundaries that underlie the static binaries in the categories of ethnicity, gender, and class across the lines that traditionally divide the private and public spheres by employing Post-Structural feminist perspectives.

Today, family studies are more interdisciplinary and more inclined toward a critique of the notion of gender, class, ethnicity, and power rather than in mere description of pattern, structure, and function across cultures of "family." Feminist scholars like Sylvia Yanagisako, Jane Collier in 1987,[1] and Shelly Errington in 1990, propose the importance of understanding "social wholes" by analyzing "specific social and cultural processes" and the concrete location of the study.[2]

Similarly, Postcolonial scholars have conducted critical inquiries to re-evaluate the universalizing tendency and have insisted on careful attention to the specific cultural location of the family studies, especially in the former colonies. In line with those scholars, Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson also encourage the feminist critical theories to be "poststructuralist/ postmodernist" in theorizing "woman" to avoid homogenizing its category. Furthermore, we should pay more attention to its heterogeneity and specificity in its "class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation" dynamic.[3]

Moreover, contemporary scholars also pay attention to "family" not as an essence with a natural particular structure and function but as an elaborate and complex set of discourses inscribed in tropes, metaphors, and signs. Examples of tropes familiar in everyday life are motherland, fatherland, children of the nation, son of the soil, father of the nation, and mother earth. Some tropes unite people of different nations and races in one family of shared religion, such as brothers and sisters in God, brotherhood, sisterhood, and "cousinhood" among Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, and Afro-Caribbean. Those tropes/metaphors, which are also explicitly gendered, borrow from a conception of intimate family ties and kinship relations.[4]

Such metaphor of explicit gendered intimate family ties is also familiar in Chinese society and culture as seen in the way of addressing particular leaders in their community: “The emperor as the Son of Heaven, the king as ruler-father, and the magistrate as the father-mother official.”[5] These “family/ kinship” idioms are not

[1] Jane Fishburne Collier and Sylvia Junko Yanagisako, *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987),13-15.

[2] Jane Monnig Atkinson, Shelly Errington, and Joint Committee on Southeast Asia, *Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 1-58.

[3] Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* (Atlanta: The University of Georgia Press, 1998), 58; Sri Mulyani, “Enmeshing Class, Gender, and Ethnicity of ‘Family’ in Selected Fiction by Women Writers,” *Kritika Kultura*, no. 35 (2020): 44–71, https://doi.org/10.13185/KK2020.003505.

[4] Janet Carsten, *After Kinship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 155.

[5] Wei-Ming Tu, “The Confucian Tradition in Chinese History,” in *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*, ed. Paul S.

merely dead tropes/ metaphors. They have a powerful influence on the real struggle of people in actual societies as they experience violence or engage in war to defend the unity of particular nations, religions, ethnicity, and groups.

As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have said, the “metaphors we live by structure our actions and experience.”[6] In fact, it has been argued that the language of metaphors has been “so deeply embedded in culture that we may not see them as metaphors at all.”[7] Scholars such as Benedict Anderson in 1991,[8] David Schneider in 1977, Michael Herzfeld in 1987,[9] & in 1997,[10] Liisa Malkki in 1994,[11] and Janet Carsten in 2007 have seen the connection between the language of kinship like “family,” nation and religion, carefully scrutinizing the “blurred boundary between kinship, the nation, and religion.”[12]

In light of the crucial role of "family" as both materially and discursively constructed, both substance and discourse in our society, this study aims to explore the ways "family" as discourse is variously understood in Southeast Asian literature, particularly in the works of Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese woman writers. The gender and ethnic focus in this study have several reasons. Firstly, Chinese civilization and culture are undoubtedly an important influence in Southeast Asian societies. In particular, the Confucian conception of the Chinese "family" is one element at the core of these forces. To illustrate, the Chinese "family" has a long history of elaborate kinship idioms, values, and "family" rituals, which are practiced by ethnic Chinese around the world.

The modern anthropologist Han –Yi Feng has identified and classified more than 340 terminologies concerning kinship relations that refer to sex, age, generation, and affiliation. There are terms for maternal and paternal relatives as well as for younger and older relatives. Just as important as kinship relation is kinship distance in the conduct of "family" rituals following the kinship system. In this kinship system, the Chinese "family" is explicitly and clearly gendered and hierarchized as a patrilineal family, giving privileges to the oldest and male members instead of the younger and female members of the "family.”[13] In the future, this elaborate and intricate family system might no longer be relevant to the social condition in mainland

Ropp (Berkeley: University California Press, 1990), 117.

[6] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1980), 5.

[7] Lakoff and Johnson, 66; Carsten, *After Kinship*, 160.

[8] Benedict Richard O’Gorman Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 5-7

[9] Michael Herzfeld, *Anthropology Through the Looking-Glass: Critical Ethnography in the Margins of Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 57-70.

[10] Michael Herzfeld, “Anthropology and the Politics of Significance,” *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 41, no. 3 (1997): 107–38.

[11] Liisa Malkki, “Citizens of Humanity: Internationalism and the Imagined Community of Nations,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 3, no. 1 (1994): 41–68, https://doi.org/10.3138/diaspora.3.1.41.

[12] Carsten, *After Kinship*, 162.

[13] Andre Burguiere et al., eds., *A History of the Family, Volume II: The Impact of Modernity*, First edition (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1996), 491–552.

China with their one-child family policy. Indeed, Confucianism itself and the Confucian “family” system have undergone both up and down dynamics following the social and political changes in both mainland China and the Asian region. Still, the Chinese “family” both in mainland China and overseas remains generally stereotyped as strongly upholding the traditional Chinese “family” system and values. Toshio Kuroda, in his comparative study of the Chinese family and Japanese family, highlights a new dynamic of the Confucian “family” in Asia in the conclusion of his *Tradition and Change in the Asian Family*.

> “The family is a universal system and a basic unit of all societies, but its focus and functions are influenced by the social economic, cultural, and political systems of particular countries, and even vary within local areas of individual countries. Within countries sharing the Confucian culture, family structures may vary considerably.”[14]

Broadly, this study is interested in the Chinese "family" across regional and cultural boundaries, particularly in Southeast Asia, in relation to the identity politics of ethnicity, class, gender, and power relation. More specifically, however, women writing is the focus of this study because it is in the "family" that gender roles are initially learned and performed in a patriarchal society. Thus, the “family” is a crucial site for feminist struggles against patriarchal domination with its gender and social inequalities.

In Chinese culture and society, notions of "family" shape the lives of its members in many fundamental ways. For example, Chinese classics of both fiction and non-fiction have an extensive record of family narratives. These Confucian classics, prescribed in detail, are rules of conduct on familial relations and rituals. Understandably, children in Chinese families are brought up with *The Twenty Four Examples of Filial Piety* as an important part of their upbringing. To illustrate, one of the Chinese classics and one of the world’s great novels, *Hong-lou-meng* (*Dream of the Red Chamber* or *A Dream of Red Mansions*) by Cao Xueqin (Ts’ao Hsueh-ch’in), is a vivid and detailed depiction of the two branches of the Chia joint-family life in eighteenth-century imperial China.

Accordingly, the family's life also becomes the favorite subject of the May Fourth Movement writers of the mid-1910s and 1920s, such as Pa Chin and Ding Ling, in their struggles against imperialism and Chinese traditional Confucian culture. In fact, many scholars on Chinese studies generally read Pa Chin's most famous work, *Jia* (*The Family*) in 1933 as a May Fourth Movement’s update on *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Meanwhile, Ding Ling, the iconic Marxist feminist, borrowed the fictional pattern of *Dream of the Red Chamber* in writing her famous work, *Muqin* (*Mother*), in 1933. Her work frees her female characters from the oppressions of Confucian familial tradition

[14] Lee-Jay Cho and Motoo Yada, *Tradition and Change in the Asian Family* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 1994), 54.

and persuades women to prioritize their role and contribution to the state and not only the "family."[15]

Ethnic Chinese women writers outside mainland China also emphasize women's concerns with addressing issues about the family in their literary works. Notable among these women writers are Chinese American: Amy Tan with her works, *The Joy Luck Club* in 1989, *The Kitchen God's Wife* in 1991, and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* in 1976.

Equally, ethnic Chinese women writers across Southeast Asia share this concern, such as seen in the works of Chinese Filipinos: Xin-Mei's *Afraid to be Chinese* in 2006, Arlene Chai's *The Last Time I Saw Mother* in 1995 and *Eating Fire Drinking Water* in 1996; the Chinese Indonesian: Clara Ng's *Dim Sum Terakhir* in 2006 and *Gerhana Kembar* in 2007; the Singaporean and Malaysian: Suchen Christine Lim's *A Bit of Earth* in 2001 and her other works, Shirley Geok Lim's *Sister Swing* in 2006 and her other works, and Catherine Lim's *The Song of Silver Frond* in 1998 and her other works.

In general, the Chinese family, known as the *jia* (家), is a bounded group of kin related by marriage, descent, or adoption.[16] The Chinese family practices vary from one region to another; however, they generally follow the Confucian values of age and gender deference from younger to older members and women to men. The Confucian Chinese family is patrilineal that includes all family members, both the dead and the living intimately bound through one male ancestor observed continuously through ancestor worship. The presence of a male heir is crucial to perform ancestor worship, which is regarded as one of the most fundamental functions of the Confucian Chinese family; thus, the preference and demand of the male heir to continue the patriline are indispensable. Having a male progeny in the family is considered an act of outmost filial piety, which is also one fundamental core of Confucian values. According to Confucius, filial piety is "the root of all virtue."[17] Additionally, Mencius, one of the greatest Confucian scholars, states in *The Works of Mencius* that "There are three things which are unfilial … and to have no posterity is the greatest of them."[18]

To ensure the survival and continuity of the Confucian Chinese patrilineal family, the membership of each member of the family is clearly defined, and as mentioned earlier, demands submission and respect for the older and male members of the

[15] Tani E. Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 57; Mulyani, "Enmeshing Class, Gender, and Ethnicity of 'Family' in Selected Fiction by Women Writers," 49.

[16] Olga Lang, *Chinese Family and Society* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1976), Pp.; Grant Evans, *Asia's Cultural Mosaic: An Anthropological Introduction* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1993); Myron L. Cohen, *Kinship, Contract, Community, and State: Anthropological Perspectives on China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

[17] Lang, *Chinese Family and Society*, 10; Confucius and Zengzi, *Xiaojing: The Classic of Filial Piety in Chinese and English*, trans. James Legge and Ivan Chen (New York: Oxford, 1979), 466.

[18] Lang, *Chinese Family and Society*, 19.

family. The Confucian endorsement of patriarchy is clearly seen in the way the Confucian conception of gender dictates women's roles and place in the family. As famously articulated in the Confucian Three Obediences to govern women, as an unmarried woman (daughter), she must obey her father. Furthermore, as a married woman (wife), she must obey her husband, and when her husband dies as a widow, she must obey her son.[19] There are many rules and values articulated in the Confucian discourse on the family to enforce the Chinese family's patrilineal and patriarchal orientation; this study focuses on the three important Confucian principles, namely, filial piety, *yin-yang*, and *nei-wai* principle.

Historically and traditionally, Chinese cultural and ritual texts link patriline to civilization. The famous Confucian text of the ritual tradition, the *I-li* (*Book of* Rites), states that animals know their mothers only but not their fathers. The same thing goes for "People of low social status." Such people do not know the "importance of knowing who father and mother are"; therefore, accordingly, the higher social status and civilization, the longer line of ancestors people have, and thus, they will "acknowledge and hence worship."[20]

Similarly, *Chuang-tzu*, the Taoist text, expresses a similarly shared perspective. The text explains, "In the age of the legendary ruler Shen-nung, people knew their mother and not their father." Likewise, other important texts, *Spring and Autumn Annals of Mr. Lu* and *Book of the Lord of Shang*, post similar ideas. Furthermore, the two texts show that such absent distinctions between men and women will lead to the absence of a ruler and hierarchy. Those classic sources show the interweaving of gender, civilization, and politics. Thus, in such a view, it is understood that "before there were gender distinctions and recognized paternity, political order was not possible."[21] To maintain this civilized and political order, paternity and patriline require the transmission of surnames, that is, "from father to child. The surname was a permanent marker of one's paternal family membership."[22]

In general, the ancestor/memorial tablet and ancestral hall in the Chinese house function as one of the markers of "being Chinese," and by performing the proper rituals and propriety such as ancestor worship and filial piety, a member of the Chinese community would acquire this stage of "being properly Chinese; thus, being civilized" as well. This family altar

[19] Zang Xiaowei, "Family, Kinship, Marriage, and Sexuality," in *Understanding Contemporary China*, ed. Robert E. Ganer, 3rd ed. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008), 317–40, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781685850463-012; Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

[20] Ann Waltner, "Kinship Between the Lines: The Patriline, the Concubine and the Adopted Son in Late Imperial China," in *Gender, Kinship and Power*, ed. Victor King and William D. Wilder (London: Routledge, 1996); Victor T. King and William D. Wilder, *The Modern Anthropology of South-East Asia: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2020), 69, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003060277.

[21] Waltner, "Kinship Between the Lines," 69.

[22] Waltner, 69.

and memorial tablets are not only a sign of filial piety but also a display of family social class as well; thus, it shows the merging and blurring of the private-public gaze of the family story and history.

Another example of the practice of rituals and ancestor worship to show filial piety and the merging and blurring of private-public space and gaze is a family ritual such as the funeral ceremony and rituals. In this funeral ceremony, the family (especially the eldest son who leads the mourning ceremony and the family's official mourners) may hold a grand funeral for their parents. They show (literal display) this filial piety publicly and, at the same time, display the family's wealth and social status. As expressed in the opinion that "Through family rituals, such as mourning for deceased parents and providing splendid funeral ceremonies, sons demonstrated to the public their filial piety."[23]

Filial piety is an important part of the Chinese family tradition. The Chinese character of filial piety itself *xiao* (孝), consists of two characters *lao* (old) in the top and *zi* (son) in the bottom. There are some possible interpretations of this ideographic combination of *xiao*. From the top to bottom order, it signifies "that the old are supported by the young(er generation)" but it can also mean "that the young are burdened by the old or even that the young are oppressed by the old" or "simply that filial piety is the continuation of the family line, that is, the father produces the son."[24]

In addition, for a son, filial piety is expected both privately and publicly as well as during the life and afterlife of his parents such as dictated by Confucius's *Classic of Filial Piety*: "In serving his parents, a filial son reveres them in daily life; he makes them happy while he nourishes them; he takes anxious care of them in sickness; he shows a great sorrow over their death, and he sacrifices to them with solemnity."[25] There is a common agreement that filial sons are defined "as those who served their parents kindly and rightly when they were alive and observed the mourning rites when their parents died.[26] Meanwhile, although daughters can be filial, there is not a rigid rule for it because daughters are expected to marry, and as a wife, then she would perform this filial piety for her husband's family. Such is the official and expected duty of a woman and/or wife. As stated in the social rule, "While men practice filial piety by maintaining the unity of the parental household, women practiced it by helping their husbands fulfill their filial duties and by fulfilling their everyday duties as daughters-in-law."[27]

Chinese cultural texts are rich in illustrations of these filial wives, filial widows, filial daughters-in-law, and filial sons. There are not many depictions of filial daughters. One famous example of a filial daughter is the story of Mulan, the brave girl who replaces her aging father in the army because of filial piety reason and not motivated by patriotism. In rural North

[23] Charlotte Ikels, ed., *Filial Piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia*, 1st edition (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2004), 21.

[24] Ikels, 3.

[25] Ikels, 19.

[26] Ikels, 19.

[27] Ikels, 20.

China, a private-public rule and sphere of this filial practice of daughter-son difference also exist, as stated by Eric Miller: “The support of sons is public; that of daughters is private. The support of sons is based on a cultural norm, discussed with village leaders, written, signed, and discussed openly. The support of daughters is private. It is unspecific, poorly defined, and spoken of indirectly.”[28]

In addition to filial piety, *Yin-Yang* (阴阳; 陰陽) and *Nei-Wai* (内外) also play a key role in the Chinese family tradition. The Confucian conception of gender is fundamentally based on two different principles: the *yin-yang* (simplified Chinese: 阴阳; traditional Chinese: 陰陽), “originally referred to the weather conditions of being cloudy and sunny respectively” before it finally comes to the popular association of the term with females and males[29] and the *nei-wai* (内外 inner-outer) distinction. The first principle is seen “as complementary to each other as well as hierarchically related.”[30] According to Henry Rosemont, this *yin-yang* base does not imply “gender essentialism but a relational term:

> “Nothing is either *yin* or *yang* in and of itself, but only as it stands relative to something else. An elderly man is *yang* with respect to an elderly woman, but *yin* concerning a young man … This relationality clearly militates against the view that the early Chinese thinkers are essentialistic in their accounts of women and men.”[31]

Such relational and non-essentialist concept is only one of many different interpretations. Meanwhile, scholars and lay people who support the so-called Popular Confucianism that promotes Confucian values through the practices of family ethics tend to view this *yin-yang* principle as prescribing gender essentialism. They hold such a view to strengthening family and clan values for their own interests, following the popular Confucian values that dictate, "… men, however mean, are in all cases *yang*; women, however noble, are all *yin*.”[32] Such gender relation is hierarchical and not equal one as well. In addition, *Analects 7* points to a parallel between women and "small men" and the difficulty of dealing with the so-called "inferior men" and women, expressing that "It is hard to take care (*yang*) of the women and the small men. If you let them get too close, they become insolent. If you keep them at a distance, they complain.”[33]

Meanwhile, the second foundation of gender conception, the *nei-wai* (inner-outer) distinction suggests the separation between the private (domestic) sphere and the public (social) sphere. Gender construction based on this *nei-wai* principle

[28] Ikels, 51.
[29] Sin Yee Chan, “Gender and Relationship Roles in the Analects and the Mencius,” *Asian Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2000): 115–32, https://doi.org/10.1080/09552360050121119.
[30] Chan, 116.
[31] Chan Sin Yee, “The Confucian Conception of Gender in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Confucianism for the Modern World*, ed. Daniel A. Bell and Hahm Chaibong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 319, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511509964.015.
[32] Yee, 315.
[33] Yee, 312–33.

assigns females to the inner and males to the outer sphere.[34] Furthermore, according to Chan, this *nei-wai* based gender construction "actually denotes two kinds of separation," as revealed in *Book of Rites*, Chapter 12:

First is a physical separation between the sexes: a guard between males and females (*nan-nu-chih-fang*). This does not mean only that males and females are physically separated in that women's activities are confined to the domestic spheres. It also means that within the domestic sphere, the interaction between males and females, including husbands and wives, follows rules of strict physical separation, such as males and females did not use the same stand or rack for their clothes. The wife did not presume to hang up anything on the pegs/stand of her husband, nor to put anything in his boxes or satchels, nor to share his bathing house.'[35]

The second kind of separation denoted by the gender distinction is a functional distinction—as a division of labour. It is the idea that 'Males are primary in the outer, and females are primary in the inner (*nan-chu-wai*, *nu-chu-nei*). Women are assigned to handle domestic affairs such as nurturing the children, cooking, weaving, and other household work. Men, on the other hand, handle public and social affairs such as farming, commerce and, for some men, holding government office.[36]

Chan argues that these two Confucian foundations of gender conception are only functional distinctions and cannot be used to justify the subordination of women. However, in Confucian society, there have been various forms of subordination and exclusion of women from various social and public opportunities and functions in the name of this Confucian virtue. Not to mention that women themselves also have often accepted and even endorsed such gender roles in accepting the domesticity and nurturing role. Concerning this functional distinction, Chan gives a cautionary suggestion for understanding this functional separation:

> "Note that the basis of the separation, the inner-outer distinction, does not imply a dichotomy between the domestic and the public domains because, in Confucianism, family is viewed as "neither as completely separate from nor a secondary to the public domain."[37]

In the Confucian concept, "family" is the first and most basic place for preparing and training its members to cultivate moral qualities and familial virtues. For example, moral qualities and familial virtues such as filial piety cultivated inside the family will determine success in the public domain as well. *Analects 8* states, "When the ruler feels profound affection for his parents (*ch'in*), the common people will be stirred to benevolence."[38]

[34] Chan, "Gender and Relationship Roles in the Analects and the Mencius," 116.
[35] Chan, 116.
[36] Chan, 117.
[37] Chan, 117.
[38] Yee, "The Confucian Conception of Gender in the Twenty-First Century," 312–33.

The inter-connected and continuous relation between the "family" and the public domain suggests the concept that "males are still assigned the role of ruler of the family, despite their belonging to the outer realm." As revealed by Mencius in *The Book of Odes* says, “He set an example for his consort, and also for his brother, and so ruled over the family and the state.”[39] Furthermore, Chan also shows this male domination in these two spheres and roles:

> “Consequently, to say that women are assigned to the inner realm merely means that their primary duties lie in managing household affairs, not that they are in charge of the family. To say that men are assigned to the outer means that their primary duties lie in managing external affairs, even though they still rule over the family.”[40]

In conclusion, it is clear that the Confucian Chinese family is male-centered, and women are expected to play their roles as daughters, wives, mothers, and mothers-in-law. As dictated by the Confucian discourse of family, it is to enforce the survival and continuity of patrilineality and patriarchy in their society. Lim’s *TSOF* challenges the traditional Confucian discourse of "family" that is oppressive not only to women as a particular gender category but also to those of less fortunate social class. Thus, *TSOF* uncovers how the trinity of ethnicity, class, and gender has systematically marginalized the minority groups and privileged those majority groups in the dominant power. By doing so, it also attempts to articulate the struggles and voices of marginalized groups.

Compared to other world contexts, studying women and gender as a social category is quite late and under-researched in Southeast Asia; thus, it is also considered "a relatively new field." Moreover, Southeast Asian research on women and gender is still trapped in "the house of gender" and rarely contextualized into the other intersectionality of social categories. Instead of focusing only on the question of “indigeneity” in Southeast Asia.[41] Scholars should provide more critical analysis on the diversity and multiculturism in Southeast Asia, moreover, with its heterogeneity and specificity such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, religion, and other relevant social categories.

Ruth Morse’s “Novels of National Identity and Inter-National Interpretation” is another example of the ‘uncritical contextualization’ of the Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese women writers such as Catherine Lim and their works.[42] Morse has contextualized the Chinese identities of the characters in Catherine Lim’s novels into the Southeast Asian and Singaporean ethnic Chinese specific context; however, her analysis of the Confucian influences on

[39] Chan, “Gender and Relationship Roles in the Analects and the Mencius,” 118.

[40] Sin Yee Chan. “Gender and Relationship Roles in the *Analect* and the *Mencius.” Asian Philosophy* 10.2 (2000): 118.

[41] Liana Chua and Rusaslina Idrus, “Introduction: Unpacking Indigeneity in Southeast Asia,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 37, no. 1 (2022): 1–26.

[42] Ruth Morse, “Novels of National Identity and Inter-National Interpretation,” *College Literature* 19/20, no. 3/1 (1992): 60–77.

the characters are still very general without any specific ethnicity, gender, and class complex relation.

Therefore, this present research objective is to provide critical analysis of the study of the family as a site of gender and class struggles with its complex intersectionality of ethnicity, age, and power relation in Catherine Lim's novel *The Song of Silver Frond*.

B. Method

This study deals with the discourse of "family" in Catherine Lim's *The Song of Silver Frond* (*TSOSF*) to investigate how “family” functions as a site of gender and class struggles. *TSOSF* depicts the gender and class struggles of the female characters as they fight for equal rights and equitable roles in their families. In *TSOSF*, a complex struggle by women is shown to be waged to articulate efforts by women to challenge “Eastern” patriarchal traditional ideologies through the discourse of the “family.”

The primary data of this study was the Anglophone novel titled *The Song of Silver Frond* by the ethnic Chinese Southeast Asian woman writer from Singapore, Catherine Lim. *TSOSF* was published in 2003, and this study used the reprinted version of 2004 as its primary data. The secondary data were all the relevant texts used in this research to support the critical analysis of *TSOSF* in relation to ethnicity, class, gender, and Chinese family, as well as feminist critical literary theories and, particularly, post-structural feminism. Those secondary data were from books, journals, and many more. Those data were employed to conduct this qualitative research.

To enable this study to unveil the diversity and the unique social complexities presented in Lim’s *TSOSF*, this article employed critical feminist perspectives in literary studies and the social sciences, particularly the post-structural feminist perspectives. Those theories viewed gender not as an isolated issue but as a category closely related to class, ethnicity, and other relevant aspects. Accordingly, by utilizing such feminist literary perspectives, this study emphasizes heterogeneity, non-fixity, specificity, and reflexivity in analyzing *TSOSF*.

This study provides its theoretical framework by attempting to relate gender as a category with its complex intersectionality. To conduct such attempt, this study related the contexts of Chinese women from various experiences before focusing on its specific focus. Women in mainland China and ethnic Chinese women in Southeast Asia have been said to have benefited to some extent from the Western, global as well as local women's movements and various emancipatory activities throughout the decades.

Chinese women have enjoyed greater public roles, participation, and economic independence. However, this public participation and economic independence do not necessarily and automatically liberate Chinese women from patriarchal oppression because the oppressions are not only economic but also ideological. Thus, unveiling how patriarchal ideologies work, operate, and

shape the sociocultural experience and gender relations in society is important. Literary studies were one of the relevant disciplines to reveal this patriarchal ideological system at work.

To study the patriarchal ideology in relation to the discourse of family, this study makes use of different ideas on "family," particularly drawing from feminist critical perspectives which foreground the importance of social category intersectionality in each specific context. In particular, this study owes to the ideas of Sylvia Junko Yanagisako and Jane Fishburne Collier in their critique of the presumed universality of western analytic dichotomies in gender and kinship studies. They propose the analysis of "social wholes" through what is called "a three-faceted approach," which refers to "the explication of cultural meanings, the construction of models specifying the dialectical relationship between practice and ideas in the constitution of social inequalities, and the historical analysis of continuities and changes."[43]

The analysis of the "specific social and cultural processes" by Yanagisako and Collier is further developed by Shelly Errington, who argues that cultural location makes specific the construction of notions of sex, body, personhood, kinship, and power in Southeast Asia.[44] The category of "cultural location" is important in this study of "family" discourse. Because instead of focusing on the so-called timeless features of Chinese "family" values, this study intends to deal with the localized practices of Chinese "families" in concrete societies in Southeast Asia in terms of the multiple determinations of nationality, region/location, gender, class, religion, ethnicity, and/or language. Sara Mills's perspective and appropriation of discourse in 2005[45] and Judith Butler's performative theories of sex and gender in 1990[46] are also employed to analyze the "family" in Lim's *TSOSF.*

Following the tradition in the feminist literary scholarship of redefining and rethinking the discourse of "family" as used in everyday, commonsense language, this study views "family" as a discourse, an ideology, a patriarchal construct that maintains its power and hegemony by privileging patriarchal values as ideal norms. In particular, following Deborah Chambers's critical organization in her book, *Representing the Family* in 2001,[47] this study attempts to problematize this patriarchal discursive construct and politics.

This study also draws from Sin Yee Chan's argument that the domesticity and the subordinated role assigned to women in the Confucian gender relationship and role system are basically a "functional one." Furthermore, Sin Yee Chan argues

[43] Robert Parkin and Linda Stone, *Kinship and Family: An Anthropological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 275–90.

[44] Janet Carsten, *After Kinship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 64.

[45] Sara Mills, *Discourse* (London: Routledge, 2005), 29-47.

[46] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1990), 3-33.

[47] Deborah Chambers, "Representing 'the Family,'" in *Representing the Family* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2001), 1–32, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446219546.

that although the Confucian "conception of gender itself is not justified," there is room for "positive influence on the status of women through its elements of reciprocity and respect."[48]

C. Results

1. "Family" in Lim's *The Song of Silver Frond*

First of all, to start the close analysis of the novel, this part briefly introduces the main female character and her family. Silver Frond, the heroine of the novel, was born in a low-income family. Her mother, the breadwinner of the family, worked hard to provide for the family, while the father spent most of his time gambling and drinking in the teahouse. Silver Frond and her two sisters all have the "Silver" attribute attached to their name because the "Golden" names are reserved for the future sons that their fathers hoped to have. Poverty forced her to work at a very tender age and deprived her of formal education. Finally, she found the opportunity to get her (private) education through the generosity of the rich man in the town, Ah Cheng Peh, referred to as the Old (Venerable) One, who would become her future husband.

Silver Frond has special qualities of physical beauty and a great passion for learning. In her spare time, Silver Frond entertains herself by mimicking and picking up gossips and stories from the neighbors about life in the great house where the Old (Venerable) One lives with his three wives and their big family. One fateful day, she plays with her doll and acts out, elaborating those gossips through storytelling and songs in *xiaoshuo* manner (the Chinese tradition of fiction). By fateful coincidence, the Old (Venerable) One overhears and witnesses all this small play performance about his entire life and family conducted by this poor young girl. He is at the same time confused, angry, and fascinated by this girl and her storytelling and songs.

The two then are united by fate in the course of the story. He has to wait for her maidenhood to bloom to make her his fourth wife; when all finally happen, they have to defy all the traditional rules and values to be able to be together. The old man loves Silver Frond, his fourth wife, as a person, as a woman, and not as a virginal bride or "the bearer of sons," a "traditional wife" who is expected to produce a male heir. He allows her to get an education, to be able write and read books that she longs to learn, to recite poetry that she is used only to hearing from distance when she watches rich children studying with their private tutor. Silver Frond, with all her struggles, maintains to be a filial daughter, a good sister, and an independent woman who shares her knowledge by becoming a teacher for those less fortunate children. Above all, she is widely known as the poor girl who conquers the rich old man through her songs and storytelling.

The epilogue of the novel reveals Silver Frond's granddaughter who is deeply fascinated with the life story of her grandmother. This granddaughter is a

[48] Chan, "Gender and Relationship Roles in the Analects and the Mencius," 115.

sociology student who planned to write a post-graduate thesis about virginity, sexuality, male ownership of female bodies, social taboos, and the like. She finally decides to write a novel instead about the life of Silver Frond, thus, signaling the continuity of the female voice in her family history.

Catherine Lim's *TSOSF* clearly displays the role of men in facilitating the articulation of the female voice in the character of Silver Frond. Silver Frond can exert more power and voice in her storytelling and songs than in poetry, and she still needs the help of her male tutor to choose appropriate poems from classical Chinese to express her love for her husband.

Through songs and storytelling, she can directly express her feelings to her husband, and in effect, also influences her husband to express the feeling of "I love you" directly that the Chinese, let alone a male Chinese, would dare to express. The novel also challenges the discourse of "family" in assigning woman to female roles only in their reproductive and nurturing function to the young member of the "family." Silver Frond shows that she wants more than just to be able to perform the patriarchal values of the female role in the "family."

2. "Family" as a Site of Gender and Class Struggles

The beginning of Lim's *The Song of Silver Frond* narrates the father-son conflict in the neighboring village of Sim Bak where Silver Frond, the main character, lives with her poor family. The father-son conflict is actually only a trivial familial dispute: the father accuses the son of stealing some money. However, this small private family quarrel cannot be solved by the family, and not even after the sworn-taking before the family's ancestral tablet. Only then, therefore, it becomes the public spectacle to be resolved by the communal truth cockerel conducted by the temple priest and witnessed by a large number of people from the neighbouring villages including Silver Frond and his father.

The presence of Silver Frond in this public religious ceremony is actually not advisable because as a child-woman nearing her first menstrual period, she is considered to be "unclean;" thus, would desecrate the holy ground of the ceremonial event; moreover, such ceremonial attendants are mostly men in general: "Ah Bee Soh wanted to make sure that her daughter, with breasts already beginning to bud under her blouse, would stop going to places visited by both gods and men, to avoid annoying the first and arousing the second."[49]

The beauty of Silver Frond is indeed depicted as a very extraordinary gift from the gods. People of her village and the town would stop and look at her in admiration to praise "her eyes, skin, hair, mouth," her family's poverty cannot hide her radiant beauty. Silver Frond herself is

[49] Catherine Lim, *The Song of Silver Frond* (London: Orion, 2004), 4.

conscious with her physical beauty as well as the danger of the "manhood" and somewhat unease with her blossoming girlhood that attract many men to frequently attempt to harass and touch her. The novel describes:

> "For the pain in my body to stop, so that the Bad Brothers will not follow me and disturb me" … She was too shy to mention her breast, and the sharp little spurts of pain she was experiencing, which seemed to be pushing them outwards and making them swell, for all to see. She had taken a little mirror into the bathroom one day and looked at herself in dismay and embarrassment … Men and boys stared at her, and she knew it had to do with the fearsome changes in her body.[50]

Regardless of their daughter's fear of her own female body and the opposite sex threat, both of her parents are very proud of having her as their daughter admired and pursued by men, old and young in their village and town because of her beauty and blossoming female body. Her mother modestly acknowledges all the compliments on her daughter's beauty. Meanwhile, her father openly expresses his pride in his daughter's beauty and intelligence (and storytelling talent compared to the best Singaporean storyteller on the radio). Ah Bee koh says: "My daughter is not only beautiful but a clever story-teller! She is even better than Liang Por."[51]

Like most "traditional Chinese parent in the olden days," Ah Bee Koh also views his daughter's beauty as an asset that will benefit the parents and the family as a whole: "In the time of the emperors in the ancestral country, Silver Frond would have been spotted and plucked out of her village, like a tender flower, to bloom in the imperial court, and, for the rest of their lives, her parents would have been well provided for."[52] Ah Bee Koh indeed feels grateful when the Old One, the richest man in their village, asks his permission to make Silver Frond his fourth wife, and he demands a shophouse and a coconut plantation for the betrothal gift.

Ah Bee Koh's pride and "love" for her daughter is only for the family's social mobility in terms of wealth and better living. Moreover, still cannot make up for his disappointment of having only daughters in his family, as reflected in his reaction and the act of naming his three daughters. The novel describes:

> "When Silver Frond was born in 1931, the midwife came out of the room to apologize to her father, on behalf of her mother … 'A girl-child,' he echoed with a surly laugh, and left the house to drown his disappointment in a beer with his friends at his favorite coffee-and-beer shop in the town … He did not come home for three days. While Silver Frond's mother waited for his return, she gave the baby a temporary name, which was really no name. 'Char Bor Kia,' she said sadly to the newborn sleeping in her arms. Female Child. For a whole week, name and sex were the same, each reflecting the other's unworthiness.[53]

The husband's reaction to the birth of the baby girl reflects a typical disappointment of traditional Chinese

[50] Lim, 35.
[51] Lim, 7.
[52] Lim, 25–26.
[53] Lim, 54.

"family" for having the "less preferred female progeny" instead of the much-awaited "male heir" of the family surname and lineage. Ah Bee Koh would go drinking with his friends twice more when his wife gave birth to his other two daughters and left them unnamed for several days to be called only "Simply Female."

In the traditional Chinese naming system, the worthiness and unworthiness of male and female progeny in the "family" are also reflected in naming sons and daughters. The novel describes:

> "Golden Frond. She will be as beautiful as her name," said Ah Bee Soh, as she looked at the newborn baby girl in her arms … All would have been well except that Ah Bee Koh, having relinquished the right to name his daughter, had suddenly been seized with the desire to reclaim it for future sons.[54]

Naming the child in the family is a privilege right of the father or the family's patriarch. However, Ah Bee Koh's disappointment of having only girls makes him give his wife this naming right but not give up his authority to reserve the best name only for his sons despite the fact that these sons have not yet been born.

These precious, good, and best names in the traditional Chinese naming system for the children in their family are actually for formal and legal name purposes only (birth certificates and school registers) that also reflect the hope and prayer of the family to the children. However, these children also have nicknames in the family that they are referred to daily and usually of meager or humbling names such as "Bad Smell, Little Pig, Deaf, Little Bun, Fat Bun, Dumb, No Teeth, No Hair … in order not to offend the gods or attract the jealousy of evil spirits."[55]

In the future generation, this act of naming in the ethnic Chinese family is changing to follow the more modern tradition or different religious beliefs and interracial marriage in the family. Such changes in the traditional naming system are not necessarily welcome and accepted by the older generation, yet it does happen anyway, such as lamented by Ah Bee Soh in her old age for having grandsons and granddaughters with foreign names. The act of naming is indeed closely related to the ethnic Chinese tradition, and Chinese identity and naming outside the acceptable Chinese tradition will be deemed "un-Chinese" and improper.

The act of naming in the traditional Chinese family system is based not only on familial or parental rights but also on familial/communal relations, as displayed in the Old One's family and household. The richest man in the village, Ah Cheng Peh who later marries Silver Frond as his Fourth Wife, is also called the Old (Venerable) One. He acquires this "old" name because of his old age and "venerable" because of his generous donations to the town's temple and the death home for the destitute elderly. Thus also showing that a name is not only given by the parents (father exclusively) but is also acquired through communal and public deed and respect.

[54] Lim, 56–57.

[55] Lim, 55.

The Old (Venerable) One has three wives who are all addressed and referred to not by their own names but based on their relation to their husband (as a wife) and their position in their marital relations. Therefore, they are referred to as First Wife. Second Wife, and Third Wife. These name orders also signify their privilege, right, and position in the family, respectively, as shown in the way Silver Frond's mother. Ah Bee Soh teaches her daughter how to treat them when she sells their family produces, eggs, in the big house of the Old One's family. The novel describes:

> "It was an unvarying routine her mother had taught her: begin with First Wife, as a sign of respect for her status, and let her have first choice of the eggs; then go with the rest to Second Wife and Third Wife. Apologise politely if there are not enough eggs left and promise to bring the rest the next day. Receive the money with both hands and say thank you very respectfully.[56]

The sex and age of the family members in the ethnic Chinese family are two important factors in assigning their familial status and rights, as well as their gender role in the family rituals. As previously discussed in the observance of ancestor worship, tea ceremony, wedding, and funeral rituals.

Such familial position, status, and right are relational based that follow the traditional yin-yang correlation.[57] The Old One is *yang* with respect to all his three wives. Meanwhile, his First Wife is also *yang* with respect to his Second and Third wives, but the First Wife is *yin* with respect to her mother-in-law, the Old One's mother whom they call The Old Mother, the matriarch of the family. In short, the male gender and sex (social and biological role) and seniority of age (e.g. eldest sons and younger sons, mother and daughter, wife and mother-in-law, and so on) are given more privileges.

The Names (naming) can also be used to refer to one's profession or even to mock and belittle particular people of a particular profession and social class, such as displayed in the way people of Sim Bak village call Silver Frond the egg girl. The boys from their neighbourhood like to call her the egg girl to tease her. The Old (Venerable) One's wives call her so because she is the one who sells eggs to them, and even the Old (Venerable) One calls her "the Egg Girl" when he attempts to upset her despite her protest and demand to called by her proper name. Silver Frond exclaims:

> "My name is not Egg Girl! My name is Silver Frond!' … 'Egg Girl,' he said again, looking with mischievous provocation at her ... 'Egg Girl, Egg Girl.' He chanted spitefully, once more surprising himself … Silver Frond. Of course! The Venerable One recollected the Egg Girl's name suddenly, as he tossed about on his bed, unable to sleep … 'Egg Girl, Egg Girl,' he had taunted, and it was then that she not only told him her name, but flung at him words that had so profoundly disturbed him …[58]

[56] Lim, 17.

[57] Henry Jr. Rosemont, "Classical Confucian and Contemporary Feminist Perspectives on the Self: Some Parallels and Their Implications," in *Culture and Self*, ed. Douglas Allen (Boulder: Westview, 1997).

[58] Lim, *The Song of Silver Frond*, 51 & 57.

Later, as the wife of the Old (Venerable) One, Silver Frond also assertively changes the traditional Chinese way of naming and addressing each other as she publicly calls The Old (Venerable) One "my husband" and demands him to do the same. This direct address of referring to each other as "husband" and "wife" between spouses is indeed considered bad and improper. The novel describes:

> "My husband. My wife. First Wife shook her head when told. That was not proper. Husbands and wives never referred to each other as such, or used each other's names. Instead they made oblique reference only, through using their children's names. 'So-and so's father has gone to Malaya. I will consult So-and so's mother on the matter.' At the most, they would say 'My male-person,' or 'My female-person', and avoid using those terms that only the very coarse, or the very shameless, used publicly, in the full hearing of others."[59]

Based on the discussion of naming in a traditional society with all different familial relation, gender, and sex identities (e.g., father, mother, son, daughter, male, female) communal, social, and professional status, a name, therefore, is viewed as a both private (e.g., familial) and public (communal, professional, social, and ethnic) identity and changeable and mobile following social and cultural changes such as generational, religious, lifestyle, and other factor dynamics.

In terms of gender relation in the family, the observance of the *yin-yang* and *nei-wai* principles varies from one family to another. Additionally, in the novels, gender relations are over-determined by class relations as well. In terms of gender relations in the family, for example, the observance of the *yin-yang* and *nei-wai* principles varies from one family to another, depending on class origin. These Confucian rules of family and gender inform the social practices in mainland China and other Asian regions contextually, such as South Korea, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia. Confucian scholars in South Korea have attempted to convince South Korean feminists that Confucian values can be compatible with gender equality. While explaining their defense of the Confucian gender perspective, they simultaneously articulate different views of gender into different social classes. They argue that the term 'woman' is considered 'inferior' is not for 'woman' in general but is addressed for the "lower-class women such as maidservants."[60] Their defense and arguments, therefore, not only sexist but also classist, articulating both gender and class marginalization. In *TSOSF t*his is illustrated by the different ways by which these principles are observed in practices and rituals by two families coming from two different social classes: Silver Frond's poor family and the Old (Venerable) One's wealthy family. In Silver Frond's family, it is the wife/mother, Ah Bee Soh, who becomes the family's breadwinner with the help of her three daughters because of the

[59] Lim, 372.

[60] Eunkang Koh, "Gender Issues and Confucian Scriptures: Is Confucianism Incompatible with Gender Equality in South Korea?," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 71, no. 2 (2008): 345–62.

inability of this husband/father to provide economically because of his drinking and gambling. However, despite his failure in fulfilling his duty as a good provider, he remains the "boss" in the family, having more say, authority, and power.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that the hardworking wife, Ah Bee Soh, is no longer a completely traditional wife. She is relatively outspoken compared to the truly traditional silent, docile, submissive wives of the Old (Venerable) One, who all completely depend on their husband's economic power in the Great House. Unlike Ah Bee Soh, the hardworking wife, the traditional wives of the wealthy man and other women and female members of his family are not allowed much contact with the outside world. This is because traditionally, the "proper" sphere of respectable women of respectable families (presumably also "wealthy") is inside the domestic and private space of their homes.[61]

The change in social class through marriage of Silver Frond has resulted in a change in gender relations as well. Class mobility has transformed the space in which she can move, resulting in a shift in gender relations, too. To illustrate, as a daughter of a low-income family, she used to be able to work outside the home, traveling from door to door to sell vegetables and eggs or to pick up laundry from the neighbors. However, once married to the Old (Venerable) One and since becoming his Fourth Wife and the new mistress in the Great House, her mobility of space begins to be constrained by her newly acquired social class.

Ironically, following the dichotomies of *yin-yang* and *nei-wai*, the Old (Venerable) One is traditionally expected to ensure the education of his daughters and granddaughters, provided that the education takes place inside the home. Hence, in the eyes of society, the Old (Venerable) One's family's respectability is secured by educating the women in his family in observance of Confucian principles. However, consistent with *the nei-wai* principle, he sends the male members of the family to school. At the same time, the women (daughters, granddaughters, and Silver Frond) are educated at home with the private Sinseh teaching them. Hence, economic power enables the wealthy, like the Old (Venerable) One's family to preserve traditional gender values that relegate women to an inferior position, but this same economic power enables the women to become educated, paving the way for change.

Meanwhile, women of poor families and lower class, such as Silver Frond's mother and sisters, who cannot rely on their husband/father's financial independence, have to work outside their house (private sphere) on their own. In families such as Silver Frond's, the *nei-wai* Confucian principle that assigns traditional gender roles and relegates women to the inner private sphere is not strictly observed in contrast to the strict observance of the nei-wai rule in the wealthy household of the

[61] Koh, 348-354.

Old (Venerable) One in the Great House. The Song of Silver Frond establishes this contrast:

> “Meanwhile, they live in a big house, and their children go to school and do not have to sell vegetables and eggs,’ said his wife with a bitter laugh, for she had already put her daughters to the ignominious work of selling their produce from door to door, and tolerating the insolence and unreasonable behavior of some of the buyers.”[62]

The hardworking mother, Ah Bee Soh, may be deemed a "traditional" woman, although she and her three daughters earn their living in the outer masculine sphere (nevertheless, the kind of work they do is still related to the domesticity chores). Although her husband is "idling all day" and "never contributing a single cent," she still holds the traditional view that women should stay inside the house and not earn a living. Nevertheless, she is compelled to break the *nei-wai* principle. After all, she is forced by poverty because her husband is incapable of being the family's breadwinner.

Nonetheless, she thinks violating the principle creates chaos—"ignominious," as Ah Bee Soh" says in the novel to describe her situation—causing shame and public disgrace. Despite the burden of being a family breadwinner, the wife/mother and the daughters perform their domestic chores as dictated by their gender roles. However, despite their double roles in both inner and outer spheres, the father/husband remains the single authoritative ruler as dictated by the Confucian principles governing gender relations. Thus, a woman's economic independence does not necessarily free her from patriarchal oppression in the family because patriarchy is not only based on economics but also on ideology.

Therefore, the functional and dysfunctional role of man in his designated sphere will not necessarily affect his continuous "ruling" power (becoming yang) in the family. Moreover, his domination in both private and public sphere as elaborated by Chan's interpretation of the Confucian ideology of *yin-yang* and *nei-wai* foundation.[63] Silver Frond's father, however, sees himself as both a good father and husband in the family. He allows his wife to criticize him and never feels insulted by her criticism and complaints. He considers himself "a very contented and grateful man" who never uses a totalitarian rule in his family. He also takes pride in his patience and dignity for not exercising male power and domestic violence against his wife and daughters. Unlike other Chinese men in their village or as cruel, a violent husband as famously depicted by Liang Por, the famous radio storyteller.

> “You are a useless husband and father’… This was too hurtful an accusation, in the daughters’ presence, for even Ah Bee Koh's easy affability ... But Ah Bee Koh prided himself on the fact that never once in their marriage had he raised a hand against his wife.

[62] Lim, *The Song of Silver Frond*, 14.

[63] Chan, “Gender and Relationship Roles in the Analects and the Mencius,” 117–18.

> Fights between husbands and wives were messy and unproductive, as he could see the many examples in the village."[64]

The quotation shows that domestic violence by the husband to the wife does happen in the village life as well as the popular tale. The first illustration by Silver Frond's father on their neighbor's domestic conflict shows that the husband's cruelty to his wife is not completely out of sanction because the in-laws/ the wife's family and relatives can complain and be involved in this marital dispute; thus, despite the husband's right and authority, the wife can still rely on her family and relative's protection.

The second illustration alludes to the gender role of a woman as a wife and daughter, that displaying a good wife does not necessarily mean a good, filial daughter. As a wife, a woman's sole duty, responsibility, and filial pity are to her husband's family; thus, she is expected to be a good, obedient wife, a filial daughter-in-law, a loving mother, and a virtuous (self-sacrificing) woman in general.

A woman is expected to perform her gender role in the inner sphere to take care of the household tasks, caring for the young and the elderly members of the family, and to help her husband to become a filial son to his parents. A woman is expected to be a virtuous (chaste and self-sacrificing) and filial daughter when she is not married. However, after her marriage, all her duties and responsibilities are for her husband's family and not her own family. This is one of the key rules in Confucian family doctrines written in various books by Confucian scholars. However, even until today, numerous Confucian interpreters still attempt to defend Confucian views on gender equity.[65]

Historically, there have been various attempts to overthrow and revolutionize these traditional Confucian genders and family values by different groups, such as the PRC Communist Party and the May Fourth movement. They persuade their followers that they will liberate women from their patriarchal families. So that they do not have to obey their fathers and husbands and instead they can achieve equality; unfortunately, women are still bound by the oppressive Confucian rules one way or the other.[66]

In TSOSF, the Confucian gender and familial rules are illustrated clearly in how Silver Front is allowed or not to interact with her conjugal family. She can still be a good and filial daughter only with the consent of her husband, as exemplified in the Old (Venerable) One's generosity to help Silver Frond's family. However, she is not allowed to visit her family without his permission. As a young girl, Silver Frond is a very obedient and filial daughter to both her parents, although she expresses more love and

[64] Lim, *The Song of Silver Frond*, 27.

[65] Kelly James Clark and Robin R. Wang, "A Confucian Defense of Gender Equity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 2 (2004): 395–422, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40005811.

[66] Wang Zheng, "Creating a Socialist Feminist Cultural Front: 'Women of China' (1949–1966)," *The China Quarterly*, no. 204 (2010): 827–49.

sympathy for her mother. She places her parents' well-being and needs as the first priority in her life more than her own desires, as seen through her prayers and wishes: "Oh, Heavenly Ribbon Princess, what reward would you like for saving my life?' said the moon, and she answered, without the slightest hesitation, 'Wealth, health, prosperity and long life for my parents."[67] Silver Frond does indeed become the hardworking, virtuous, and filial girl who is selfless and is more concerned about her parents and sisters than herself. She can continue her filial duties and responsibilities as a daughter and older sister even after her marriage only because of her husband's generosity and permission, although he restricts her frequent contact and visits with her family.

Overall, this study shows the significance of ethnic and gender intersectionality in Southeast Asian literature. By paying a specific attention to the Confucian tradition and foundation of *yin-yang* and *nei-wai* to analyze gender relation in *TSOSF*, this article also unveils the possibility for a counter-discourse to challenge the "official" traditional Confucian patriarchal discourse on the "family" in Southeast Asia. Finally, by doing so, this article also helps redefine and rethink family studies in Southeast Asia in literary scholarship in relation to the region's unique diversity of ethnic, class, gender, religious, and socio-cultural backgrounds.

D. Conclusion

Through the post-structural feminist perspectives with the key focus on ethnicity-gender-class intersectionality, this article has uncovered the way Catherine Lim's *The Song of Silver Frond* displays how "family" can become and function as an arena of gender and class struggles. There are continuities, changes, and transformations in familial practices of the ethnic Chinese "family" in Southeast Asia as a result of many different social, cultural, political, and generational changes and dynamics. Accordingly, gender relation in the "family" also undergoes continuity, change, and transformation as a result of such changes and dynamics. All family members, both male and female, young and old, can become the agents of the continuity, changes, and transformations of the traditions and values of "familial" practices. "Family" becomes a crucial battleground of the preservation, transformation, and changes of "familial" values, traditions, and practices, including the gender role, space, and relation in the "family" with its traditional Confucian foundation of *yin-yang* and *nei-wai*. Lim's The *Song of Silver Frond* also displays a very interesting narrative style in the manner of *xiaoshuo*, the Chinese conception of the novel that becomes an artistic vehicle to challenge and blur the boundary of space and role of the yin-yang and *nei-wai* Confucian principles that privilege the male and man as to hold the superior role as well as private and public space and outer role

[67] Lim, *The Song of Silver Frond*, 34.

and, meanwhile, relegating female/woman to the inferior role and domestic and private space only. *Xiaoshuo* like narrative in the form of storytelling with its gossip and rumor aspect that is considered to be an inferior and marginal genre, is able to interrupt, intrude, blur, challenge, and broken both private and public roles and space of the male dominance in both gender and class relations.

The topic of the family as a site of gender and class struggles still opens space and opportunities for future researchers to explore its aesthetic and ideological expressions dynamic in Asian literature in general and Southeast Asian literature in particular. Future researchers can also explore this topic in a more specific scope, such as in the works of Ethnic Chinese women writers in Indonesia, to contribute to the rich diversity of gender, ethnicity, class, and family portrayal in Southeast Asian literature. In addition, it is hoped that future scholarship on the discourse of the "family" in the works of Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese women writers would tackle other equally important and relevant aspects of their works using feminist literary criticism, namely, the critique of the Western feminist conceptual tools on the discourse of the "family" in their writings. For example, other feminist critical categories that have originated from the West, including "feminism" itself, might be worthy of interrogation from a non-Western location.

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