

Analyzing Cai Chongda's Destiny from a Feminist Perspective: Centering on Ah Tai's Narrative

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Cai Chongda's *Destiny* from a feminist perspective, examining how the narrative of Ah Tai deconstructs patriarchal discipline and reconstructs female subjectivity through her lived practices. According to my research findings, Ah Tai reconstructs female subjectivity through three pathways: bodily resistance, reconstituted motherhood, and discursive construction. Her story provides a culturally grounded literary case study for understanding the mechanisms of female subjectivity formation in rural Chinese contexts and how female experience gains authoritative expression through narrative. Currently, research on *Destiny* predominantly focuses on its literary qualities, manifestations of regional culture, and explorations of life philosophy. However, comparatively few studies conduct systematic textual analyses from a feminist perspective. This paper aims to fill this research gap by systematically examining the feminist narrative power and logic of subject construction embedded within *Destiny*.

KEYWORDS

Destiny; Feminist narratology; Subjectivity reconstruction; Body politics; Gender performativity

1 Introduction

Cai Chongda's *Destiny* employs a unique nested narrative structure. Framed by the authorial "I" as listener, it grants Ah Tai—an elderly, lower-class woman who has witnessed a century of upheaval in a Southern Fujian town—the central narrative voice. From a feminist narratological perspective, this centers female experiences often marginalized in traditional narratives, challenging male-dominated narrative hegemony. She is no longer merely the written "Other," but becomes the narrator of her own destiny and the giver of meaning. Starting from the prophecy of having "no sons, no grandsons, no one to send her off at death," she painstakingly constructs her own discursive authority amidst marital breakdown, social turmoil, and collapsed faith. Utilizing feminist theory, this paper explores how her narrative voice shapes female subjectivity, how her bodily practices constitute resistance and transgression against patriarchal discipline, how her reconstitution of motherhood subverts bloodline-centrism, and ultimately, how these multi-layered strategies collectively construct a narrative authority rooted in female experience.

2 Deconstructing discipline: breaking through body politics and reproductive anxiety

2.1 Foot binding: the patriarchal geographical and symbolic incision of the female body

The foot-binding experience of Ah Tai's mother serves as a metaphor for the patriarchal geographical and symbolic mutilation of the female body. In the coastal town, "those with unbound feet have wide soles, better for gripping the deck". Foot binding meant actively severing ties with the sea, becoming "land people." This bodily discipline was not only physical mutilation but symbolized women being stripped of productive roles, reduced to vessels for continuing the family lineage. Ah Tai's mother's feet were "barely larger than mine at twelve years old; she walked with great effort, wobbling from side to side". This distorted gait mirrored the twisted existence of women under patriarchy—forced to choose "land" over "sea" in a false binary, yet trapped in limbo after her husband's disappearance, endlessly questioning fate in temples, becoming a spiritual prisoner of discipline.

Ah Tai's implicit resistance to foot binding lies in her bodily integrity. Though the text doesn't directly depict her attitude, her survival practices as a descendant of "sea people"—carrying goods at the docks, farming by the shore—inherently subvert the dictate that "women should remain on land." Her body becomes a site of resistance: when men couldn't go to sea due to rheumatism, she proved with her female body that strength and survival capability are not limited by biological sex. She "grabbed small bundles and darted off," refusing pity despite her thin frame, "I worked as hard as a man, making the foreman ashamed". This conscious "gender transgression" actively intervenes in and reconstructs the gendered meaning of the labor scene. As Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity states, gender identity is not an innate essence but produced and sustained through the "stylized repetition of acts" within social space. Ah Tai's repeated actions of "being crushed by cargo and rising again" at the docks demonstrate the plasticity of gender identity. Through persistent bodily practice, she tears off the label of "weak woman," reconstructing the productive value of the female body in sweat.

2.2 From reproductive anxiety to reconstituted motherhood: subverting the uterus-as-tool doctrine

The shamaness's prophecy of "no sons, no grandsons, no one to send her off" thrust Ah Tai into patriarchy's core disciplinary arena—the doctrine of reproductive value. In traditional clan logic, the female uterus is seen as a vessel for "continuing the lineage." Ah Tai's mother was deemed "lineage-ending" for bearing only daughters, while Ah Tai fell into self-doubt over her "infertility." Seeking a son, she visited countless doctors, swallowed bitter medicine; her body became an object under the dual gaze of medicine and theology. Her uterus was detached from her whole personhood, becoming something examined, repaired, a tool to fulfill others' goal of progeny. This cruelly illustrates Simone de Beauvoir's "Other" condition: a woman's value is alienated into the utility of her reproductive organs; her richness as a "person" is ruthlessly simplified and stripped away.

Ah Tai, however, reconstitutes motherhood through adoption. When Beilai, Xilai, and Baihua enter the family as "children given by the masses" or "foundlings in baskets"—non-blood relations—she strips "motherhood" from blood ethics, imbuing it with a new dimension of social ethics. Faced with the question, "Do these children count as mine?", her actions answer: "pressing hard on Baihua's twitching veins during massages"; "carrying cargo at the dock until her back wouldn't straighten" to save money for Beilai and Xilai. These maternal practices, transcending biology, allow Ah Tai to utterly subvert the patriarchal logic equating motherhood with childbirth. She is no longer the "object gazed upon" defined by "uterine function," but an "acting subject" who actively chooses, gives, and takes responsibility. When she declares, "I'd die to keep you alive", motherhood becomes a weapon against fate, and female subjectivity is established through nurturing, not birthing.

3 Narrative authority: the generation and power of female narrative voice

3.1 Nested narrative: from "other" to protagonist

The novel grants Ah Tai discursive authority through the framing device of the authorial "I" as listener. As the traditional male narrator recedes, Ah Tai's voice rises in recollection; she becomes the determiner of meaning and narrator of historical experience. Her narration brims with first-person cognitive authority: phrases like "I know," "I think," "I conclude" frequently weave fragmented memories into a coherent female coming-of-age story. Recalling her mother's suicide by sea, she avoids sentimentality, coolly dissecting funeral customs: "My Ah Tai said she really wanted to meet whoever first proposed this custom; they were truly wicked, clever, and kind". This intellectualizing of suffering rejects the role of pitied "Other," reconstructing death narratives through the stance of observer and analyst.

Contrasting with the absence of male characters (Yang Wanliu disappears at sea, remarries in Malaysia), Ah Tai asserts her presence in docks, fields, and kitchens. Guarding her family through typhoons, hoarding sweet potatoes during famine—these easily overlooked acts of "everyday resistance" gain prominence through her telling. The narrative structure itself becomes a feminist manifesto: experiences deemed "trivial" constitute the very fabric of life.

3.2 Centralization and unique expression of female experience

In *Destiny*, Ah Tai's perspective dominates the narrative. The story revolves around her and the women around her, tracing the vicissitudes of their fates. From the teenage prophecy of "no sons, no grandsons..." to familial tragedies (deaths of grandfather, mother, mother-in-law) and her own marital and reproductive struggles, these events form the core plot. This structure centers women, breaking the traditional male-dominated narrative model.

Crucially, women drive pivotal events. Ah Tai's little sister, seeing her plight—especially childlessness and Yang Wanliu's departure—decides to marry quickly and bear children to support Ah Tai. Her proactive pursuit of marriage and autonomous decisions about reproduction alter the family's trajectory. The eccentric shamaness, Cai Yehao, profoundly influences others in her unique way. Guiding Ah Tai's mother out of despair through funeral attendance and storytelling, she becomes an indispensable catalyst, exemplifying female agency in driving the story.

The uniqueness of the female perspective lies in its intimate portrayal of Ah Tai's inner world. We witness her journey from hope to despair in seeking a child: the joy of suspected pregnancy, the agony of loss, and crippling self-doubt. Her complex, authentic grief over loved ones' deaths, and the tangled mix of anger and deep affection when her lifelong friend Ah Hua dies, reveal the richness and sensitivity of the female psyche.

3.3 Dialogues with deities: the cognitive revolution from prostration to eye-level

Ah Tai's relationship with deities reflects women's cognitive shift from prostration to eye-level engagement. As a girl, she witnesses her mother "arguing with deities" in temples, observing female passivity within the divine hierarchy. Becoming the shamaness's daughter-in-law, she hides the Goddess Furenma's statue atop the toilet beam—reconstructing the sacred in the "uncleanest" space. This act shatters the patriarchal spatial metaphor of "deities on

high," suggesting the sacred can emerge from female daily life. Standing by Baihua's sickbed, she tells Furenma, "If Baihua doesn't recover, I'll disown you from now on." Here, deities descend from arbiters to interlocutors; female speech gains equal footing.

This discursive shift culminates in rewriting the concept of "fate." In traditional narratives, fate is a masculinized authority ("fate decrees"). Ah Tai makes it tangible and confrontable: "I'm angry. I want to argue with him." Her "arguing" is not irrational venting but rational interrogation. Pondering "fate's fingers" while hauling cargo, observing "conversations between sweet potatoes and soil" in fields, fate is deconstructed into a perceptible, negotiable life condition, not an immutable divine decree. This cognitive revolution transforms women from fate's recipients into its interpreters.

4 Constructing and limiting cross-generational female alliances

4.1 Mother: symbolic detonation in despair

Ah Tai's mother constructs her subjectivity through self-destruction. Embracing ancestral tablets as she drowns herself, her act is both despairing self-annihilation and the most resolute symbolic rebellion against patriarchy. The tablets, material symbols of the patrilineal system meant for veneration in lofty ancestral halls, are cast into the waves. This violates the patriarchal ethic of "peaceful burial," condemning ancestral spirits to eternal wandering and shattering the clan's dream of "eternal lineage." Yet this self-destructive rebellion fails to create new space for existence; her subjectivity flashes briefly before extinguishing, contrasting sharply with Ah Tai's constructive survival strategies and reconstituted motherhood.

4.2 Sister: compensatory resistance and internalized patriarchy

Ah Tai's sister's marital choice exposes the fragility of female alliances: to alleviate her sister's reproductive anxiety, she actively self-objectifies: "I must marry quickly, bear a child to give to you". This compensatory resistance inherently internalizes patriarchal logic, starkly revealing its absolute control over female bodies and reproductive value. It embodies the internalized male gaze, leading to self-discipline. Her "sacrifice," while temporarily preserving the bloodline, reinforces the uterus-as-tool doctrine. Her own daughter later faces reproductive struggles, perpetuating an intergenerational cycle.

4.3 Baihua: the litmus test for reconstituted motherhood

Baihua, as a non-biological daughter with congenital illness, presents the ultimate test for traditional motherhood. Ah Tai's all-night massages for her "convulsions" subvert the patriarchal equation of motherhood with childbirth, anchoring maternal practice in concrete care rather than abstract blood ties. However, the novel reveals limitations: Baihua's eventual difficulty in marrying and bearing children due to disability suggests that even within reconstituted motherhood, women remain constrained by bodily discipline. Ah Tai's declaration, "I'd die to keep you alive", while demonstrating maternal tenacity, also exposes the immense sacrifice and pressure inherent in motherhood—does this sacrifice forge new shackles?

5 Conclusion

Destiny's adoption of Ah Tai's narrative perspective liberates her from being the "written Other." Through the interwoven strategies of deconstructing bodily discipline, subverting reproductive value and bloodline-centrism, and constructing discursive authority, she tenaciously reconstructs her subjectivity within patriarchy and historical torrents. Ah Tai is not only an actor but the authoritative narrator of her own story. It is this very act of narration that imbues her experiences with meaning and weight, achieving the final overthrow of the "Other" status. Sitting in her courtyard recounting memories, the tears and laughter filtered out by traditional narratives, the survival battles fought on docks, fields, and kitchens—all become annotations of female subjectivity. Ah Tai's case offers a valuable lens for understanding how rural Chinese women construct subjectivity amidst the tensions between tradition and modernity, discipline and resistance.

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