

# WRITING MOTHERS: CRIMINALISING THE MATERNAL FIGURES IN CONTEMPORARY TAIWANESE CRIME FICTION

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## ABSTRACT

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**Received:** 31 May 2023

**Revised:** 18 August 2023

**Accepted:** 22 August 2023

**Published:** 24 November 2023

**Citation:**

Kumpai, A., & Pumpaisanchai, N. (2023). Writing mothers: Criminalising the maternal figures in contemporary Taiwanese crime fiction. *Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies*, 23(3), 581–592.

Female perpetrators are fairly common in contemporary Taiwanese crime fiction, yet little is known about criminal mothers who engage in child abuse or commit deliberate killings due to maternal ambivalence. This research examines the depictions of criminal mothers in three Taiwanese crime novels between 2018 and 2021: Kun Lun's *Buneng rang laoshi faxian de baling riji* (2018), Ling Jing's *Zuofu tongzi* (2021), and Si Xian's *Baoqian, wo taoyan wo de haizi* (2021). The purpose of this research is to understand how criminal mothers are depicted and the sociological dimensions of maternal ambivalence concerning their violent behaviours. The research reveals that societal expectations of motherhood give rise to maternal ambivalence, not just the mother-child relationship alone. These mothers are struggling with patriarchal motherhood. Domestic violence, such as child castration, psychotic infanticide, and unwanted child filicide, is driven by maternal ambivalence caused by overburdening family responsibilities, gender discrimination, and the patriarchal mandates of motherhood. However, these mothers cannot be easily categorised as “bad” mothers because they also portray a non-threatening image of loving and nurturing mothers according to the ideology of motherhood. Thus, they cannot be described as morally good or bad due to blurred moral distinctions.

**Keywords:** Maternal figures; criminalisation; maternal ambivalence; domestic violence; Taiwanese crime fiction

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“抱歉, 我討厭我的孩子”  
“I’m sorry, I hate my child.”

This short statement, also the title of Si Xian’s novel *Baoqian, wo taoyan wo de haizi*, explicitly strikes an important note about ambivalent feelings related to the mothering process that many mothers face in daily life. Currently, Taiwanese mothers have to deal with the matrix of social norms and modern-day challenges, which results in ambivalent feelings about becoming the ideal mother according to the ideology of motherhood (Chen, 2022). The built-up ambivalence, whether conscious or unconscious, triggers uncontrollable impulses leading to child maltreatment and filicidal crimes (Tomić, 2019). Because maternal ambivalence covers a

spectrum of complex feelings that everyone knows but has difficulty talking about, it is considered to be a crime that many dare not speak its name in the 21st century (Almond, 2010b).

As domestic crimes are increasing at an alarming rate, Taiwanese crime fiction is becoming more and more complicated, offering multifaceted perspectives on gender roles within the domestic sphere. The genre is full of damsels in distress who transform themselves into active agents engaging in life-threatening actions against gender oppression because females are more vulnerable to male violence (Cai & Yang, 2000; Chen, 2000; Zhang, 2002). The roles of criminal mothers, however, have not received adequate attention from Taiwanese authors and researchers in related fields. The lack of extensive research on criminal mothers has made academics and readers generalise the victimisation and criminalisation of the maternal figure in crime fiction. Investigating the social construction of criminal mothers reveals interesting perspectives on maternal ambivalence, which leads to the deviance of criminal mothers and reinstates the idea that maternal ambivalence brings about negative feelings that mothers have toward their children (Shelton et al., 2010). In many cases, maternal ambivalence triggers mixed feelings of love and hate. Mothers have to renegotiate the intersection between their desires, social expectations, and moral ethics. Under such circumstances, their violence or monstrosity arises from transient feelings of hate, which leads to committing crimes against their children (Adams, 2014). Various studies have been conducted to demystify maternal ambivalence in Taiwanese society; it is rather complicated to discuss the contradictory feeling of a mother, thus the acknowledgement of maternal ambivalence usually requires a psychological and sociological approach to deal with the problem. Complexities of maternal ambivalence frequently present conflicts and crises in the mother-child relationship, which contribute to a state of uneasiness that deteriorates a woman's psychological balance. Despite being able to articulate this issue in the bulk of scholarly works (Hsu, 2010; Tsai, 2019; Yang, 2020), maternal ambivalence remains an overlooked subject for discussion in contemporary fiction. This important topic, however, has not gained much attention in previous research, which may be because maternal ambivalence is a part of the maternal practices we normally notice in everyday life. Through fictionalised representations, these mothers reflect the complexities of prevalent child abuse and brutal murder, which stem from various causes. Societal expectations of motherhood are considered to be the constraints triggering maternal ambivalence and leading to the criminalisation of these mothers. Because there is relatively sparse literature on criminal mothers in Taiwanese crime fiction, this research fills the gap. The overarching purpose of this research is to study how criminal mothers are depicted and how the sociological dimensions of maternal ambivalence are associated with the criminalisation of these mothers.

To elucidate the portrayal of criminal mothers in contemporary Taiwanese crime fiction, this research is primarily based on the analysis of both male- and female-authored Taiwanese crime fiction published from 2018 to 2021, a period in which criminal mothers are pervasive in the genre. The novels studied in this research are Kun Lun's *Buneng rang laoshi faxian de baling riji* 不能讓老師發現的霸凌日記 (2018), Ling Jing's *Zuofu tongzi* 座敷童子 (2021), and Si Xian's *Baoqian, wo taoyan wo de haizi* 抱歉, 我討厭我的孩子 (2021). These novels have not been studied by other academics before. Unlike their contemporaries, these three works reveal multiple dimensions of maternal ambivalence—ambivalence about combining work and family, ambivalence about being a virtuous/exemplary mother (competence ambivalence), and attachment ambivalence—from the sociological perspectives, as proposed by Brown (2011). The three works reflect the relationship between maternal ambivalence and modern mothers who subvert the representations of conventional motherhood. These mothers are overburdened with different types of mental stress. They are considered socially deviant women whose roles are disastrous to the patriarchy; thus, the retribution that befalls them at the end can be perceived as punishment for their transgression of motherhood. The images of the criminal mothers in the narratives correspond to the monstrous mother tropes found in various genres, especially those of crime fiction (Beyer & Savarese, 2022).

The general structure of the paper is as follows: the theoretical framework to understand the concept of maternal ambivalence is described in Section 2; the methodology is presented in Section 3; the representation of the criminal mothers in the three novels is analysed in Section 4; the criminal mothers and their blurred moral distinctions are discussed in Section 5; and finally, the implications of the research, its limitations, and the future research avenues are recapitulated in Section 6.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of monstrous mothers can be traced back to Greek mythology. Medea, a murderous mother who kills her two sons to inflict pain on her husband, is the figure of a monstrous mother widely recognised in classic mythology, psychoanalysis, folklore, and literary criticism. The Medea trope has been developed to expound the concept of monstrous mothers in various literary genres, especially crime fiction.

This concept owes much to Adrienne Rich's *Of woman born: Motherhood as experience and institution*, an innovative work questioning the institution of motherhood as a body of practices and assumptions governing maternity, especially about maternal hostility and violence (Jeremiah, 2004). According to Rich (1995), mothers are not instinctively loving, as she describes in the following quote:

I was haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is "unconditional"; and by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded identity. If I knew parts of myself existed that would never cohere to those images, weren't those parts then abnormal, monstrous? And as my eldest son, now aged twenty-one, remarked on reading the above passages: "You seemed to feel you ought to love us all the time. But there is no human relationship where you love the other person at every moment." (Rich, 1995, p. 23)

Rich has remarkably provided her readers with the concept of maternal ambivalence in her first chapter titled *Anger and Tenderness*. Maternal ambivalence is an experience in which mothers' feelings of loving and hating their children coexist. There is no such "unconditional" love which she explicitly refers to in her book as "unexamined assumptions" of the stereotypical representation of patriarchal motherhood. It is evident that the cultural ideology of motherhood designates not only idealised behaviours that are "appropriate" for good mothering, but also defines the emotional framework which is internalised by mothers to act selflessly according to the ideology of motherhood. Rich clearly accepts that in some parts of her life she never adheres to such traditional images. The dominant discourse of motherhood therefore disguises negative and conflicting emotions which lead to domestic violence, as Rich's eldest son experiences himself and echoes in the quote.

From Rich's point of view, maternal affection in the dominant discourse of motherhood may serve to derealise the mothers' perpetual victimisation. Here, vulnerability does not necessarily signify maternal virtues; it can, however, inherently trigger violence and fatalities, which underline the presence of maternal ambivalence, which ranges from normal feelings to highly disturbed mothering (Almond, 2010a). For this reason, maternal ambivalence has been regarded as the root of the fragmented relationship between mother and child, thus giving rise to filicide, which is a ubiquitous phenomenon in cross-cultural perspectives (Castellini, 2013; Shelton et al., 2010; Tomić, 2019). However, maternal ambivalence should not be monolithically viewed as the negative side of mothering. An investigation of the relationship between maternal ambivalence and maternal love affirms the fact that maternal ambivalence consists of love and hate, which ordinarily coexist in the passage into motherhood. Understanding mothers' hostility from the mother's perspectives makes us recognise that maternal ambivalence is a kind of mechanism that survives in the subconscious domain. This mechanism allows for necessary separation or differentiation from the familiar world for the development of later relationships (Parker, 1996). Parker's groundbreaking research from a psychoanalytical perspective resonates with the theme of maternal ambivalence, which challenges the conventional definition of motherhood, emphasising that the frozen image of an ideal mother, which is constrained by patriarchal ideology, does not accurately reflect the reality of motherhood.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative study. It is designed to explore and understand how criminal mothers are portrayed in contemporary Taiwanese crime fiction. Adrienne Rich's concept of maternal ambivalence primarily threads through this research. It challenges by all means the traditional images of ideal mothers, highlighting motherhood as a complexity of contradictory feelings and articulating the paradox between mothers' life-giving and destructive force that is integrated into the characterisation of the three criminal mothers. Due to the limitation of a sociological approach in Rich's work, this research employs the sociological dimension of maternal ambivalence, as proposed by Brown (2011), to investigate the impact of patriarchal motherhood on the mothering process. Specifically, there are two important questions this research seeks to answer: 1) How are the criminal mothers portrayed in contemporary Taiwanese crime fiction?; and 2) How are the sociological dimensions of maternal ambivalence associated with their violent behaviours?

To answer the above questions, this research analyses three novels which purportedly narrate the stories of criminal mothers, namely, Kun Lun's *Buneng rang laoshi faxian de baling riji* (2018), Ling Jing's *Zuofu tongzi* (2021), and Si Xian's *Baoqian, wo taoyan wo de haizi* (2021). The decision was made to select these three novels published from 2018 to 2021, in which mothers' crimes occur at an alarming rate (Taipei Shizhengfu Jingchaju Tongjishi, 2021). When analysing the data, emphasis was placed on the relationship between the criminal mothers' violent behaviours and maternal ambivalence. The reason behind their ambivalence was also explored. The particular characteristics of each character, such as age, family background, marital status, class stratification, psychological condition, and their motives for criminal perpetration, were investigated.

Generally, these criminal mothers were middle-aged women from middle-class families; all were married. Chuan Han's mother in *Buneng rang laoshi faxian de baling riji* was the sole breadwinner. She castrated her son due to excessive mental stress from a gendered division of labour, as Rich (1995) explicitly describes in the following quote:

Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men—by force, direct pressure, ..., and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. (Rich, 1995, p. 57)

Rich has pointed out that patriarchy has produced a gendered division of labour. It reflects what she calls “the kingdom of the fathers”, which values men over women. Sexual division of labour is the system in which domestic work is primarily carried out by women of the family. This gender division is a form of hierarchical social division—inequity in households between men and women—perceived everywhere, but not always recognised as the cause of domestic violence. Chuan Han's mother endures such responsibility until she encounters emotional breakdown.

Xingfen in *Baoqian, wo taoyan wo de haizi* was a faithful housewife who had to deal with an indifferent mother-in-law because she did not have a male child. Being treated coldly by her mother-in-law, she suffered from a dissociative disorder and murdered her female infant. Xingfen's suffering reflects notions of control over women's bodies for reproduction. Her story echoes women's purpose of existence which Rich (1995) reverberates in the following quote:

Patriarchy has told the woman in labour that her suffering was purposive—was *the* purpose of her existence; that the new life she was bringing forth (especially if male) was of value and that her own value depended on bringing it forth. (Rich, 1995, p. 159)

This quote explicitly defines women's role in a patriarchal society. Women's purpose of existence is to reproduce, that is to sustain patriarchy. Without the means of reproduction, patriarchy will die. Therefore, reproduction is the means of control over female sexuality and fertility, especially in Chinese society. Xingfen is belittled by her mother-in-law because she cannot bring forth the “male” child without which the lineage of the patriarchal family will be terminated.

Peifang in *Zuofu tongzi* decided to adopt a child due to failed pregnancies. She later murdered the child because of the family's financial crisis. Peifang can be described as an unchilded woman who blindly follows the institution of motherhood regardless of her immaturity to be a mother; she suffers from patriarchal motherhood, as Rich (1995) points out in the following quote:

The “unchilded” woman, if such a term makes any sense, is still affected by centuries-long attitudes—on the path of women and men—towards the birthing, child-rearing function of women. Any woman who believes that the institution of motherhood has nothing to do with *her* is closing her eyes to crucial aspects of her situation. (Rich, 1995, p. 252)

This quote affirms that even Peifang is inevitably affected by the institution of motherhood. In this research, Peifang is the only mother who blatantly speaks about her ambivalence in this selection of fiction. Readers typically find her actions shocking and disturbing without noticing that the author employs the portrayal of monstrosity to hide her cry for help. Peifang's barbarous actions do stem from the birthing, child-rearing role which has governed women's lives for centuries.

All the above data are analysed to study in depth how these three criminal mothers are portrayed and how the sociological dimensions of maternal ambivalence have an impact on their behaviours. English translations of the Chinese quotes belong solely to the corresponding author.

#### 4. FINDINGS

The three novels portray narratives of child castration, psychotic infanticide, and unwanted child filicide, which are triggered by maternal ambivalence. The sociological dimensions of maternal ambivalence were categorised into ambivalence about work and family, competence ambivalence, and attachment ambivalence. For the purpose of this research, each narrative has been analysed to show that the criminal mothers are struggling with patriarchal motherhood. They are women who live up to societal expectations of motherhood; however, their mothering practices are variably affected by socioeconomic and sociocultural factors that trigger violent impulses against their children.

#### 4.1 Child castration in *Buneng rang laoshi faxian de baling riji*

Mothers often feel exhausted when they have to deal with both work and taking care of their children. Mothers who have limited access to financial resources are more susceptible to conflicted feelings while integrating paid work and family (Brown, 2011). Sociological factors, such as low incomes, unstable employment, and inflexible working hours, lessen a working-class mother's tendency to practice proper mothering, thus creating acute dilemmas leading to detrimental familial relationships and child abuse (Kotch et al., 1995). In *Buneng rang laoshi faxian de baling riji*, the author points out that child castration stems from the mother's mental overload. The novel presents to the readers the aftermath of castration, which, rather than reducing masculine sexual behaviour, leads to the exceedingly aggressive behaviour of a psychopathic killer who wants to regain his lost masculinity.

In *Buneng rang laoshi faxian de baling riji*, the male protagonist Chuan Han's mother is presented as the image of a working mother who devotes herself to her family. Gender inequalities are manifested in the division of family earnings where women contribute to a majority of household incomes (Pepin & Cohen, 2021). Chuan Han's mother, an anonymous character, is assumed to have mental issues due to financial problems affecting a typical lower-middle-class family, in which she struggles hard to procure financial security. Her husband, obsessed with going out to watch violent sports, plays a subordinate role in sustaining the family. Chuan Han, who is in search of phallic power and control, is characterised as an athletic child bestowed with outrageous fighting abilities, who cannot pursue his dream as a national athlete due to a lack of financial support. It is highly plausible to suggest that Chuan Han's mother may be facing the emotional strain of parenting a lively young child while struggling to provide him with educational support. Compared to many mothers in this category, such conditions amplify constant worries about the financial status of their families, which can trigger impulsive child maltreatment (Monahan, 2020). In this case, it leads to a brutal act of child castration. Chuan Han reveals that he was involuntarily castrated when he was very young, and he could remember quite vividly the gruesome traumatic experience his beloved mother imposed on his body. The protagonist's traumatic experience displays the link between the criminal mother's mental strain caused by economic problems and the child's exposure to domestic violence during his psychosexual development. According to Sigmund Freud, a child's psychosexual stages are classified into five developmental stages: oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital (Kesavelu et al., 2021). It is assumed that the castration occurred at the phallic stage during which the psychosexual development was enhancing the child's libido while he focused on his genitalia. Here, the home is portrayed as the place to simultaneously nurture a son and castrate male identity. Chuan Han, working as a shop assistant to support himself financially at a 24-hour grocery store, recalls his horrific memory when he was young, as narrated by the author:

那截不存在的陰莖又開始疼痛，店員看到記憶中的一地濕紅，從下腹的創口汨汨涌出。那一天的他還太幼小，沒有抵抗的余地。那把剪刀原本該刺開他肚子的。母親阿，陌生的母親發了狂，就連親生的孩子都不放過。差一點，就差那麼一點，他要被母親給殺了。殘存的印象被一層有一層的恐懼包裹... 隻記得從那之後他生不如死，被迫抱著缺陷的肉體苟活。(Kun, 2018, p. 216)

[The non-existent penis began to hurt again, and the shop assistant saw a wet red spot on the floor in his memory, gurgling from the lower abdominal injury. He was too young to resist that day. The scissors were supposed to pierce into his stomach. Oh, mother! The strange mother went mad and did not even let her son off. At that moment, he was almost killed by his mother. The remaining impressions were engulfed in multiple layers of fear... He just remembered that he was better off dead since then, being forced to live with his defective body.] (Kun, 2018, p. 216)

It can be seen that the traumatic memory had been haunting him. A vivid memory of his penis being bloodily cut down by his mother reveals to the readers an image of a castrating mother who nearly kills her son. The author's narration makes the mother's power over her son evident. This reinforces that family oppression is associated with the traumatising of the vulnerable (Howard, 2021). Such violence had been intentionally kept silent by the child victim because it strongly affects his gender identity. The traumatic memory during childhood led to Chuan Han's alienated feelings regarding having a defective body, which were caused by the psychological wound of being emasculated by his mother.

Through careful analysis, Chuan Han's mother is regarded as a silenced mother trapped in a patriarchal system; therefore, the reader never hears her voice through first-person narration. Her madness has permitted her to demonstrate violent power, emancipating her from patriarchal oppression (Lui, 2000). By not giving her a voice through a first-person point of view, the author reflects male anxiety about female castration, which is hard to resist and occurs within the domestic sphere that is traditionally viewed as a sphere exclusively for women (Gunn, 2015). Thus, the maternal figure in the novel is identified with demonic characteristics which are destructive to her child. Her act represents coercive power which manifests in

physical torture of forced castration, resulting in her son's lifelong traumatic memory that has permanent effects on his gender identity.

From this point on, Chuan Han lived separately from his mother. It seemed that she was relationally abandoned by him when he reached the age of puberty as he decided to live alone. His apartment functioned as the place where he performed imaginary sexual intercourse to regain his lost masculine self. He hanged his female victim in the bathroom, and thoroughly taped her eyes and mouth shut to prevent her from seeing his naked body to avoid his emasculated shame. He inserted his phallus-like fingers into the girl's vagina to perform violent imaginary sexual intercourse, and cold-bloodedly cut her ear. His erotic emotion arose until he imagined some fluid dripping from his operated urethra. The imaginary sexual intercourse was followed by the cold-blooded dissection of the girl's body parts. The act was repeated during each act of imaginary sexual intercourse until she died, as described by the author:

店員拿起滴血的耳朵，贊嘆切割面的平整。菜刀鏘鏘落地，被店員扔掉，他雙手捧著耳朵，慢慢舉向天花板，逆著燈光抬頭看去時，瞬間竟有捧著聖物的錯覺，令他幾乎落淚... 他感覺到不存在的陰莖昂然勃起。店員閉上眼睛，發出滿足的嘆息。這感受是如此美妙... 他伸手入褲襠，觸摸到滿滿的粘滑液體。(Kun, 2018, p. 135)

[The shop assistant picked up the bloody ear and praised the smoothness of the cut surface. The kitchen knife was thrown away and fell to the ground. He held her ear in both hands and slowly raised it to the ceiling. When he looked up to the light, he instantly had the illusion of holding a holy thing, which made him almost cry... He felt the non-existent penis getting a hard erection. The shop assistant closed his eyes and sighed contentedly. It's such a wonderful feeling... He reaches his hand into his crotch and feels the slimy liquid dripping out of it.] (Kun, 2018, p. 135)

Chuan Han becomes a cold-blooded murderer. He takes pleasure in dismembering his victim. It can be implied from the narration that the dismemberment process was not finished at one time but was repeated to arouse his sexual emotion to reach orgasm, similar to real sexual intercourse. Dismemberment becomes his fascination as though he were performing a ritual associated with divinity. For this reason, an imaginary penis has to be reimagined to regain his lost self and unleash his libidinal energy. It can be imagined that being sexual allows an emasculated person like Chuan Han to feel like a real man again. This gruesome depiction shows how maternal violence against children shapes the way they grow and has a strong impact on social and psychological development (Al Majali & Alsrehan, 2019).

Child castration in *Buneng rang laoshi faxian de baling riji* displays the intertwined relationship between family income contribution, a mother's mental stress, and a child's physical abuse. A mother with less disposable income has difficulties managing the stress of being overburdened with responsibilities, which accentuates the fact that lower-income mothers are more susceptible to ambivalence about combining work and family (Brown, 2011).

#### 4.2 Psychotic infanticide in *Baoqian wo taoyan wo de haizi*

Generally, postpartum depression covers a spectrum of physical, emotional, and behavioural changes that occur after a woman has given birth (Bruce, 2020). This emotional disorder is typically believed to be associated with untreated schizophrenia (Saha et al., 2015). There is, however, scant literature on the sociological perspective of gender discrimination associated with this disorder. In *Baoqian, wo taoyan wo de haizi*, the author points out that gender discrimination against female children triggers the mother's ambivalent feelings regarding her incompetence as a good mother. Because she has failed to give birth to a male child, the suppression of her emotions gives rise to a dissociative identity, resulting in a tragic infanticide.

In *Baoqian, wo taoyan wo de haizi*, the author portrays a lower-class daughter-in-law Xingfen marrying into a middle-class family. After Xingfen was married, she followed the norms of a good wife, which later became a psychological pressure. She was not accepted by her mother-in-law because she gave birth to a daughter. This made her mother-in-law feel quite disappointed. Relationships with family members seemed distant and alienated. Transitioning into a middle-class family led to Xingfen's sense of displacement. Struggling to adjust to the new environment, she perceived that her mother-in-law, though she never treated her cruelly, was utterly indifferent to her. It is evident that her feelings of frustration were associated with her lacking a sense of belonging, causing mind-body dissonance due to residing in an alienated place, as she stated:

公公婆婆雖然不至于苛待我，但也總是冷着一張臉。待在這些沒有血緣關係的人的屋檐下看臉色，呼吸在長輩的鼻息之下，有時真的令人感到喘不過氣。(Si, 2021, p. 13)

[Although my mother-in-law doesn't treat me harshly, she always has a cold face. Staying under the roof of these unrelated people, looking at their faces, and breathing under the breath of their elders, sometimes really makes people suffocate.] (Si, 2021, p. 13)

Xingfen's statement reflects a daughter-in-law's feelings of alienation in a Chinese family. The author allows her to voice her suppressed problems to the outside world. Being a woman who lives under the roof of these unrelated people reveals that she does not belong in the place in which she resides. This leads to her struggling for an existence apart from being trapped in the domestic sphere. It can be implied from her statement that the strained relationships with other family members, the hardships of being a full-time mother, as well as the search for freedom from this oppressive atmosphere strongly affect her emotions, thus, triggering the gradual development of mental stress, which has a negative impact on parenting children (Qian et al., 2021).

Xingfen, her husband, and her first daughter were allowed to sleep in a small bedroom. In addition, like a servant, she had the responsibility of taking care of her paralysed father-in-law, serving a nourishing soup for her sister-in-law Bini, who had conceived a boy, and doing household chores even though she was pregnant with her second baby. Being frustrated by the unfair treatment in the family, she gradually developed mental stress, leading to the impulsive and violent act of harming her brother-in-law with a knife in the kitchen. Unfulfilled desires and long-suppressed emotions underpin the gradual development of a dissociative disorder (Dunn, 2004), leading to a split personality (Young, 1988). She began to hear unrecognisable voices urging her to kill her baby as she was born to destroy her happiness. The disorder is associated with amnesia, a mental symptom causing temporary memory loss, in which the perpetrator cannot remember what was done (Staniloiu & Markowitsch, 2018). Her motherly ambivalence reaches its apogee when she becomes emotionally disturbed by her baby's recurrent crying every night. Due to amnesia, she was empowered to perform a transgression of motherhood while committing infanticide herself, as she described after she found her infant's corpse on the bed:

我在棉被裡尋找臭味的來源，發現床墊已經一片濡濕。掀開棉被，發現小女兒已經發黑腫脹，蟲從女兒小小的口鼻爬進爬出，床單已經被尸水弄臟。不會的，這孩子前幾天不是好好的嗎？只是不願意喝奶而已，每天都安安靜靜地跟她睡在同一張床不是嗎？怎麼可能死掉了。(Si, 2021, p. 95)

[I looked in the quilt to search where the odour came from and found the mattress was soaking wet. When I opened the quilt, I found the little daughter had turned black and swollen, worms crawled in and out of her small mouth and nose, and the bed cover had been tainted with corpse fluids. No, the infant was doing well a few days ago, wasn't she? It's just that she didn't want to suck on breast milk, and I slept quietly in the same bed with her every day, didn't I? How could she be dead?] (Si, 2021, p. 95)

Xingfen did not even notice the foul odour until she found the mattress was soaking wet. It was until she tried to regain her consciousness by self-talk and began to recognise that her baby had already died. This abominable scene portrays an image of a filicidal mother who is oblivious to the potential consequences of her dissociative disorder. Here, the bed, which usually symbolises a loving space between mothers and newborn babies, allegorically functions as the graveyard a mother herself prepares for her baby. Xingfen inadvertently murdered her infant by suffocating her to death. She covered the baby with a quilt and sprayed perfume all over the bedroom to get rid of the unpleasant odour. The corpse began to decompose as it was left unnoticed for many days. The depiction of the corpse with worms crawling in it reveals that Xingfen has severe amnesia because she does not even recognise that her baby is already dead.

Her story reveals that, under the Chinese patriarchy, the insistence on having a son to carry on the family lineage indicates one standard of becoming a "virtuous mother." Thus, mothers are regarded as reproductive engines operating to uphold the patriarchal system (Stafford, 1992). Women who are unable to meet this standard are labelled as ineffective mothers who are neglected by their mothers-in-law or even other family members. The emphasis society places on son preference creates social panic about mothers' duties constrained by patriarchal ideology. The multifaceted outcomes of social pressure on son preference lead to mothers' mental stress, triggering violence or monstrous actions in the dark side of their nurturing, thus leading to female infanticide (Hesketh et al., 2011).

#### **4.3 Unwanted child filicide in *Zuofu tongzi***

In patriarchal motherhood, it is believed that all women want to become mothers, that maternal ability and maternal love are innate characteristics of all mothers, and that all mothers find joy and purpose in the journey of motherhood (O'Reilly, 2016). Not being able to have children leads to mothers' regrets and subsequent psychological problems (Alexander et al., 1992). In some cultures, childless mothers even face considerable stigma (Morison et al., 2016). Such a derogatory label is not equally applied to men. However, this conventional cue does not reflect the reality that not all women want to become mothers (Takševa, 2019). Maternal immaturity, therefore, leads to neglectful mothering and child maltreatment (Guterman, 2015). Many

mothers have experienced attachment ambivalence, resulting in a fractured mother-child relationship that borders on maternal filicide (Barth & Hodorowicz, 2011).

In Taiwanese society, maternal filicide has constantly appeared as a crime headline in the newspapers. The hidden cause is associated with the myth of a happy family in contemporary society (Jin Zhoukan Bianjidui, 2021; Peng, 2016). Many women yearn to have children because they believe children bring happiness to the family. They are overwhelmed by the prevailing ideologies of motherhood and don't detach the myth of motherhood from the reality. Mothers who have difficulties bearing children decide to adopt children to fulfill personal desires, without considering maternal responsibilities. In *Zuofu tongzi*, the author looks into the truths inherently hidden within the realities of motherhood, raising social awareness of the problematic mother-child relationship associated with adoption and attachment ambivalence. This kind of ambivalence stems from conflicting emotions in which mothers have difficulties developing a positive bond with their children (Brown, 2011). Unlike previous literature, maternal filicide in this novel displays a tragic narrative of unwanted child filicide, revealing the realities of homicidal behaviour related to socioeconomic factors in Taiwanese society.

In *Zuofu tongzi*, the author narrates the haunted experience Gao Chunfan encounters in his room. He told his parents that he communicated with Xiaojie, a young female adolescent of unknown origin. Xiaojie became visible only in his presence. Behind such an eerie story lies a tragedy of child abuse linked to the former inhabitants. The Gao family house was formerly inhabited by the Wu family. Wu Hanbin and Wu Peifang ran their own business. Peifang experienced recurrent failed pregnancies; therefore, she adopted a 6-year-old girl called Hongyan. She desired the social face of becoming a mother and wanted to earn monthly adoption subsidies from the government, without considering the realities of motherhood. In this case, maternal immaturity and a lack of maternal responsibility led to child abuse fatalities (Olecká, 2022). Peifang became more and more resentful and irrational when she heard Hongyan cry. Hongyan was slapped harshly in the face and beaten every day. She struggled to live with her ruthless mother day by day under difficult circumstances. The situation worsened when Peifang had her biological child. The genetic bond between the mother and her biological son was far greater; the making of the family institution through adoption, thus, was no longer necessary and was characterised by ambivalence (Lambert, 2019). Hongyan was excluded and became the "other" person in the family, as narrated by the author:

... 拳打腳踢是家常便飯，領養那個孩子就是個錯誤，本來以為可以有個孩子，賺點名聲，順便還能領補助，天曉得照顧孩子這麼麻煩！開銷又大，又要讓她念書還要供她生活，最重要的一有自己的孩子後，誰會要別人家的小孩啊？... 後來他生意失敗，諸事不順，又要多養一個小孩，就是氣不打一處來，不爽就拿她出氣，老婆也一樣，再後來連學都不讓她上了，想到要養她到大，就覺得心梗。(Ling, 2021, p. 240)

[... punching and kicking are considered habitual violence. Adopting that child is a mistake. They originally thought that they could have a child, earn some fame, and receive subsidies. How troublesome it is to take care of a child! ... There are huge expenses; she has to study, and they have to provide for her living. The most important thing is that after having a child of their own, who would want a child from another family? ... Later, due to a failed business, everything gets stuck, and they are raising another child. This makes them feel increasingly exasperated. Anytime he gets annoyed, he will vent his anger on her. So will his wife. Later, she is not allowed to go to school. Thinking of raising her makes them extremely irritated.] (Ling, 2021, p. 240)

Hongyan was regularly punched and beaten by the ruthless couple. She endured a long period of parental maltreatment due to being treated like an object rather than an individual. The home that should be a second shelter for an adopted daughter turns out to be a prison where she experiences insurmountable suffering. Peifang and her husband inflict endless physical injury on Hongyan. Hongyan's passivity as a marginalised girl reflects the status of an ideal victim, who is prone to be traumatised, thus generating considerable sympathy from the readers. The main reason for such abuse primarily stems from parental immaturity in raising children. For the couple, raising an adopted daughter—something which adds to household expenses—becomes an inescapable mistake. Their murderous desire arose when the family business went into bankruptcy, and their entire family inevitably fell victim to economic pressures. Hongyan was not allowed to attend school. She was starved so that she would slowly die of malnutrition. As Hongyan continued to survive, Peifang decided to get rid of her ruthlessly and inhumanely, as narrated by Wu Hanbin:

不是我殺的... 我... 至少不是我踩的！... 是佩芳踩的，那孩子又哭又尖叫，佩芳又從沙發上往地板跳，說要踩斷她的骨頭，她就不會再哭了...

我想說讓她病死也好，但她病了這麼多次就硬是死不了，佩芳不讓她吃東西，希望可以便虛弱點，其實是真的差不多了！可我就不知道那天她做了什麼，讓佩芳這麼生氣，會把她扔在地上踩了又踩... (Ling, 2021, p. 240)

[I didn't kill her...I...at least I didn't trample her!... Peifang trampled her, and the child cried and screamed. Peifang jumped from the sofa to the floor again, saying that she would break her bones so that she wouldn't cry anymore...

I want to say that it would be better to let her die of sickness, but she didn't die after being sick so many times. Peifang didn't let her eat, hoping that she would be weak. This is probably all I knew. However, I didn't know what made Peifang so angry that she threw her on the floor and trampled her again and again...] (Ling, 2021, p. 240)

Wu Hanbin's statement emphasises that Peifang is the sole perpetrator of this crime. She is depicted as an exceedingly brutal mother who wants to murder her adopted daughter because she cannot stand her recurrent crying. Peifang regards Hongyan as a hindrance she wants to eradicate. That is why she tries to starve her to let her die slowly. This scene raises an important question about why Peifang did not make an abrupt decision to trample her to death. One possible reason is that she feared legal punishment. Another reason is that she may not have wanted to kill Hongyan herself at first. Even Wu Hanbin did not know why she undertook such a barbaric action. It is plausible that Peifang's murderous desire derives from maternal ambivalence. Her uncontrolled emotions, therefore, triggered an impulsive action, leading to her repeatedly trampling her adopted daughter to death.

Peifang's blank indifference to the crime—she told the neighbour that she knew nothing of it, as her adopted daughter had accidentally bumped into something—reflects the decline in moral values of middle-class women who treat marginalised children inhumanely. Inarguably, Peifang is a cultural product and representative of the class values and the community to which she belongs. The author's depiction of the harsh contradictions between the ideology of motherhood and the realities of a resentful mother who killed her adopted daughter to ease the family's financial burdens reminds us of a middle-class mother whose illusion of motherhood falls apart when she has to bring up a child under economic pressures. What the author aims to convey to the readers is the depiction of a young mother's immaturity, materialistic passion, and lack of moral integrity, which eventually leads to her calamity and the tragedy concerning her adopted daughter. The way Peifang treats Hongyan reflects social attitudes towards marginalised children, who are confined to the periphery of society; they are derealised, dehumanised, and deprived of their basic rights. The author's description of the crime arouses sympathetic feelings in readers about the insurmountable suffering an adopted daughter receives at the hands of a mother who "once" loved her. Peifang was incarcerated for six years as punishment for her brutality. Although her six-year sentence was somewhat unsuitable for the severity of her crime, she later faced the collapse of the entire family.

In the three narratives, the authors reveal that the true culprit of these actions is the societal expectations of motherhood. Chuan Han's mother, Xingfen, and Peifang are trapped by the ideology of motherhood. They are the mothers who try to live up to the norm of motherhood until they cannot tolerate it anymore. The sociological dimensions of maternal ambivalence are directly associated with the mothers' violent behaviours rather than the mother-child relationship alone. These three mothers are women who transgress conformity, not because they desire to challenge social norms, but because they are constrained by patriarchal motherhood (Tang, 2014).

## 5. DISCUSSION

In Taiwanese families, patriarchal ideology places responsibility for the family on mothers. Mothers are women who have to sacrifice themselves for the family (Zhang, 2019). Moreover, they also represent the cultural values of the family (Li, 2016). If they fall from virtue, they are socially condemned as diabolical mothers. For this reason, the narratives of criminal mothers are typically generalised into the narratives of deviant mothers (Zhou, 2011).

However, Rich (1995) has argued that no ethical ideal has deserved unconditional respect and adherence from women's point of view since women have generally been treated outside the patriarchal law. The absence of treating women as individuals is usually present in the structure of patriarchal families and the language of patriarchal ethics. The history of motherhood confirms that infanticidal and filicidal cases are often considered the products of patriarchal oppression in the institution of marriage. From Rich's point of view, it is evident that the three stories reflect the concept of extreme patriarchal oppression or *jidian fuquan yapo* that permeates Taiwanese families, which is the main cause of infanticidal and filicidal crimes in Taiwan (Weng, 2019). The three stories reveal that motherhood without autonomy and choice paves the way to a sense of

having lost control. When a mother is not allowed to voice her frustration, her rage and despair are turned toward what she loves (Rich, 1995). For this reason, morally judging criminal mothers under the dichotomy of good/bad binaries, regardless of women's unendurable suffering, might seem appropriate under patriarchal law but unjust to women who have experienced social inequalities in many aspects of their life (Fess et al., 2021).

In reality, the three mothers—Chuan Han's mother, Xingfen, and Peifang—suffer from patriarchal motherhood. Like many mothers, they have been expected to love unconditionally and selflessly. Society's insistence on becoming "good mothers" triggers their ambivalence. Maternal monstrosity is a direct assault on this expectation (Henry, 2017); however, they cannot be simply categorised as bad mothers. They, to some extent, conform to the conventional norm of motherhood. Chuan Han's mother, suffering from lone motherhood after the death of her husband, works hard to support her son's education. Xingfen's strong maternal instincts are vividly displayed when she first sees her baby. She cuddles and breastfeeds her baby with love. Peifang, the most monstrous of all, kills her adopted child for the survival of the whole family. Her brutality is associated with the selfishness of maternal love, which is regarded as biological imperative that drives a mother to do everything for her family and her biological son (Rinaldi, 2017). These details reveal the three mothers share common traits with "good mothers."

Through criminal narration, the authors seize our attention concerning the incongruity between motherly devotion and the destructive force caused by the constraints of patriarchal motherhood; thus, they cannot be categorised as morally bad. These mothers do, however, create blurred moral distinctions when we try to judge criminal mothers according to contemporary values and social contexts.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The three narratives destabilise the stereotypical manifestation of maternal identity. They challenge and transgress the dominant discourse on motherhood, producing terrifying images of mothers whose roles contradict maternal ideology. Recovering the narratives of these criminal mothers makes us understand the maternal figures in contemporary Taiwanese crime fiction, whose transgressive acts disrupt the conventional binaries of good and bad, caring and cruel, nurturing and maltreating, thus creating blurred moral distinctions. Due to the spectrum of mental illness, cultural group distinctions, and socioeconomic strata, they cannot be simply categorised as bad mothers (Adams, 2014). The three mothers embody the spectrum of motherhood as simultaneously life-giving and destructive (Mangham, 2007). As with the majority of studies, the current research is subject to some limitations. There is still much work to be done on the portrayal of criminal mothers in other media, especially in contemporary Taiwanese crime movies. Because contemporary movies portray "moral ambiguity," there is no social consensus about right and wrong, or guilt and punishment (Tzanelli, 2007). Researchers with a special interest in film representation of female offenders would do well to analyse how crime movies portray criminal mothers, which may reveal different aspects of domestic violence driven by maternal ambivalence.

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