

Reconstructing Romance: New Ideals of Chinese Femininity in the Romantic Video Game *Tears of Themis*

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ABSTRACT

China has experienced a wave of feminism in recent years, expressed primarily through cultural products and social media. Due to the tightly controlled political environment, much of this discourse has centered on strategies for women to attain personal and economic autonomy within the existing power structure. This essay argues that *Tears of Themis*, a popular, female-oriented romantic video game (RVG), exemplifies this new strand of Chinese feminism by constructing characters that challenge existing norms of romantic relationships and storylines that reveal the physical risks posed to women by economic and social inequality. By portraying an avatar who achieves romantic autonomy by putting education and career ahead of romance, *Tears of Themis* pushes back on the prevailing narrative that career-focus damages women's romantic prospects. Dialogue consisting of slogan-like statements of support from the avatar's suitors and their families constructs a feminized male ideal that reflects the values and expectations of Chinese feminists. Further, by centering its storylines on the avatar's work as a criminal lawyer, *Tears of Themis* exposes how violence against women is enabled by imbalances in economic and political power. Through these creative strategies, *Tears of Themis* contributes to contemporary discourses of feminism and femininity in China by demonstrating how personal choices in professional and romantic relationships can become a catalyst for social transformation.

Introduction

Dating from the beginning of the Reform and Opening Up period in the late 1970s, the People's Republic of China has undergone a resurgence of traditional gender roles and patriarchal values. Before the reform period, the Maoist government aimed to eliminate sexual distinctions and downplay conventional gender roles and expressions. Women were encouraged to enter the labor force, and regulations required equal pay, paid maternity leave, and public childcare (Wu & Dong, 2019). When the state began to focus on economic modernization after 1978, both the economic and social spheres gradually re-segregated. The erosion of employment and welfare provisions forced families to take over previously socialized tasks such as childcare. Such tasks effectively fell on working women, weakening their competitiveness in the labor market and constraining their freedom of choice (Du & Dong, 2007). This created a substantial gender disparity in labor force participation, unemployment rates, and income. At the same time, under the single-child family planning policy, the state promoted slogans that emphasized motherhood and traditional gender roles, classifying previous socialized work as duties of women. Women were urged to "return home" and "fulfill long-neglected domestic duties" in order to "nurture the most intelligent child" (Song, 2011, p. 6).

This shift in economic and social policy gave rise to a generation of women with unprecedented awareness of gender inequality and discrimination. Born during the transitional period of the 1980s and 1990s, they experienced little explicit discrimination in primary and secondary school and grew up with expectations of

equal treatment, economic opportunity, and unprecedented personal choice, yet when they reached employment age, they encountered an increasingly segregated workplace and culture (Zhang et al., 2008). This contradiction gave birth to a “new flourishing of women’s agitation, unprecedented both in its scope of participation and its visibility,” which has “incited multifarious forms of discourse on feminism” in China (Wu & Dong, 2019, p. 475). Although this agitation has at times taken the form of explicit protest against laws and regulations, the highly controlled political environment under the ruling Communist Party has confined expressions of protest primarily to the cultural realm. Women make bold statements about sexuality, family and romance, and gender discrimination on social media platforms such as The Red Book and Weibo, typically centered on how to achieve individual autonomy within the existing power structure. Self-described “feminist” narratives promote idealized female identities as strategies for leveraging education, career, and family to achieve sexual and economic independence (Wu & Dong, 2019).

This paper examines narratives of femininity in *Tears of Themis*, a female-oriented romantic video game (RVG), released in July 2020 by miHoYo, Co., Ltd., a Shanghai-based video game development and publishing company. RVGs provide a unique lens into the identities and motivations of their users (Hua & Xiao, 2023). The gameplay revolves around a female “avatar” (i.e. player-controlled character) and her romantic interactions with male non-player characters. In addition to regular gameplay within the game’s iOS/Android app, players receive interactive voice messages and text messages from the non-player characters, which strengthens players’ identification with the avatar and helps to develop a parasocial relationship (PSR) with the non-player characters (Song & Fox, 2015). Originating from studies of television, PSR refers to the “conversational give and take” between viewers and characters that simulate “face-to-face” interactions (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956, p. 215). By establishing PSRs in RVGs, players perceive and respond to game characters as if they were in real social relationships (Banks & Bowman, 2014). Players become emotionally attached to the avatar as they experience similar emotions and events, eventually leading to deep identification to the point that they see the avatar as a version of themselves (Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013). Thus, RVGs like *Tears of Themis* can provide deep insight into players’ real-life identities and aspirations.

Drawing on characterization, dialogue, and story structure, this essay develops three conclusions about narratives of femininity in *Tears of Themis*. First, the avatar, Qiang Wei, portrays an ideal of autonomous womanhood that fits neatly into a strand of contemporary Chinese feminism described by scholars as “non-cooperative Chinese feminism” (Wu & Dong, 2019, p. 482). This strand of Chinese feminism encourages women to delay or forgo marriage and childbirth to focus on attaining economic resources and educational excellence. Education and financial independence are framed as prerequisites for personal and sexual autonomy, which allows women to stay single and childless as long as they please or avoid conventional marriage and family altogether (Wu & Dong, 2019). *Tears of Themis* portrays and promotes this ideal through the characterization of the avatar, whose dedication to education and career facilitates a high degree of autonomy in her romantic relationships. Second, dialogue between the avatar, the male characters, and their families develops a feminized male ideal that caters to the aspirations of women who identify with the non-cooperative strand. Male characters and their families make explicit, slogan-like statements of support for the avatar’s lifestyle, while the game design allows players to pursue multiple romantic partners simultaneously without any pressure to commit to an exclusive relationship. Third, detective-style story structures reveal how violence against women is at once widespread and widely concealed in a male-dominated society. As the avatar, a criminal lawyer, investigates crimes against women, the game shows how economic and social inequality facilitates both violence against women and its concealment. Through these elements, *Tears of Themis* at once develops an implicit critique of a male-dominated society and offers players strategies for resistance through personal choices in romance and career.

Chinese Feminism and Femininity

Since roughly the mid-2010s, female identity in China has become a subject of intense public debate. Because these discourses are rooted in the unique historical and political situation experienced by Chinese women, Chinese scholars Angela Wu and Yige Dong (2019) have stressed the need for caution in deploying theoretical frameworks that were developed to analyze discourses of feminism and femininity in the Global North, and have coined the term “Made-in-China Feminism” or “C-fem” to describe “locally emergent women’s agitations identified and perceived as ‘feminism’ in China” (Wu & Dong, 2019, p. 488). This essay employs Wu and Dong’s theoretical framework to understand the identities being constructed, challenged, and modulated by Chinese feminists and their critics since the mid-2010s. Wu and Dong have identified two main “strands” of C-fem that have emerged in recent years, dating to the mid-2010s: entrepreneurial C-fem, which self-consciously performs sexuality and conventional gender roles as a means of “maximizing returns” in the marriage market, and non-cooperative C-fem, which pursues educational excellence and economic resources as a means to obtain personal and romantic autonomy (Wu & Dong, 2019, p. 480).

Entrepreneurial C-fem encourages women to see marriage as an economic transaction and pursue strategies to maximize their return (Wu & Dong, 2019). Women following this strand may act out traditional femininity or domesticity; however, the explicit goal is personal autonomy, achieved by obtaining control over economic assets via marriage. In the words of ayawawa, a popular blogger who promotes the values of entrepreneurial C-fem, “Marriage is anchored by children and property. Taking control of children and property means taking control of your marriage” (Wu & Dong, 2019, p. 480). Labeling this strand as “feminist” may seem questionable from the perspective of feminism in the Global North, as it promotes hypergamy and enshrines the male as the family breadwinner. However, the entrepreneurial strand’s emphasis on individual agency and its pragmatic view of marriage as a source of personal economic security rather than familial duties differentiates it from traditional Chinese femininity. By taking control of sexuality and performing traditional roles for personal gain, entrepreneurial C-fem maximizes returns in the marriage market and promotes individual benefits for women, rather than sacrificing one’s own interest for the perceived benefit of the family (Wu & Dong, 2019).

Non-cooperative C-fem operates by the exact opposite logic. While entrepreneurial C-fem exchanges women’s sexual autonomy for economic standing, non-cooperative C-fem views economic standing as a means to sexual autonomy. The name “non-cooperative” comes from this strand’s protest and uncooperativeness towards the prevalent marriage market. An example can be seen in its rebranding of the label of “leftover women” that had been applied to single women with excellent educations and resumes who were delaying marriage and childbirth or abandoning them altogether (Wu & Dong, 2019, p. 482). While the “leftover women” label framed educated, unmarried women over 27 years old as having a depreciated value in the marriage market, non-cooperative C-fem rebranded them as “successful women” (a homophone of “leftover women” in Mandarin Chinese) who were economically independent and refused to settle for conventional marriages or mediocre men (Wu & Dong, 2019, p. 482). Non-cooperative C-fem thus seeks to destigmatize being single and encourages women to work hard and pursue their careers instead of devoting their time to the marriage market.

While Wu and Dong (2019) stress that both strands can be seen as challenging the existing post-socialist patriarchal order, they predict that the non-cooperative strand is more likely to develop into a “collective force capable of initiating structural change” (Wu & Dong, 2019, p. 488). Although it may appear to support the existing economic order by promoting career advancement and the accumulation of wealth, they argue that economic independence is not the ultimate goal of non-cooperative C-fem, but rather a means to personal and sexual autonomy.

“Non-Cooperative C-Fem” and *Tears of Themis*

Tears of Themis exemplifies non-cooperative C-fem’s values of hard work, intelligence, and personal autonomy through the characterization of the avatar, Qiang Wei. A young, professional woman who lives alone and is

dedicated to professional success, Qiang Wei graduated from WeiMing University¹ with a law degree and is employed at Themis Law Firm as a solicitor. Each chapter is about a case she investigates and argues in front of a criminal court. Qiang Wei acts more like a detective than a criminal lawyer, and thus players get involved with finding clues, presenting evidence - almost every aspect of the case. In the middle of each chapter, players must connect all the evidence to analyze the crime, and if the player fails to reach the correct conclusion, they must reconsider and try again before advancing (Tears of Themis, 2020). As in non-cooperative C-fem, work is the primary focus; the romantic portion is presented only as the side story.

Players experience and identify with Qiang Wei's drive to succeed by doing high-quality work and improving herself through education. She frequently stays up late in the office to work on a case when she could have gone home or spent time with a romantic partner. She often goes to the office even on weekends, using her spare time to prepare for her senior lawyer test. She volunteers for any type of extra work available at Themis Law Firm to train herself, from researching important criminal cases to mediating small civil cases. This discipline and desire to improve is reflected in Qiang Wei's motto, "Work is my lover" (Tears of Themis, 2020, Episode 12/ Chapter 1 of Zuo Ran's "Yi Mu Story"), which has become a popular catchphrase among fans.

Qiang Wei is characterized not only as a hard worker, but also an intelligent woman who solves problems, generates constructive ideas, and utilizes her intelligence to achieve career success. In one of the first chapters, she successfully handles a murder case for a well-known billionaire. She finds evidence by thinking creatively: as the suspect is a celebrity, she contacts obsessive fans and paparazzi for evidence and eventually retrieves the gloves he used while committing the murder from a fan who loves to collect his personal belongings (Tears of Themis, 2020, Main Story Episode 2, "Unaffordable Love"). Soon, a well-respected senior associate at the firm recognizes her outstanding abilities, and asks her to become his work partner, though she is still a junior associate at the time (Tears of Themis, 2020, Main Story Episode 2, "Unaffordable Love"). Thus, Qiang Wei's image thoroughly reflects the non-cooperative theme of achieving socioeconomic status through intelligence and dedication to a career.

Non-cooperative C-fem "considers personal economic standing not an end in itself but a means to sexual autonomy in society" (Wu & Dong, 2019, p.482). In this regard, *Tears of Themis* again reflects the values and expectations of this strand. Qiang Wei is pursued by four suitors, Xia Yan, Zuo Ran, Lu JingHe, and Mo Yi. Not only are they designed to be handsome, but also wealthy and successful. Xia Yan graduated from Capital University² with a degree in biological engineering and was secretly selected to become a member of the Ministry of State Security³ (MSS). Zuo Ran, a senior lawyer⁴ at Themis Law Firm, graduated from WeiMing University with a Ph.D. in law, and having passed the senior lawyer qualification examination⁵ at the age of 28, became the youngest senior lawyer since the establishment of the qualification system.⁶ Lu JingHe is the executive president (EP) of a large business conglomerate. Born into a billionaire family, he takes over the family business even though he is still a postgraduate at WeiMing University. Mo Yi is a well-known psychologist and the owner of Mo's mental health research center.⁷ He has a double Ph.D. in psychology and education from King's College of Swalt⁸ and publishes frequently in professional journals. The identities of the male suitors,

¹ A fictitious university in *Tears of Themis*, modeled after Peking University (北京大学), one of the top universities in China.

² A fictitious university similar in rank to WeiMing University.

³ A fictitious department that works for the central government to ensure citizens' safety.

⁴ A fictitious law degree that is the highest qualification a lawyer can obtain.

⁵ A fictitious qualification exam with a passing rate of less than 1%.

⁶ A fictitious system that classifies lawyers into different degrees via qualification exams.

⁷ A fictitious private research center that aims to investigate more about mental health.

⁸ A fictitious university in the fictitious European state of "Swalt."

all near the top of the socioeconomic ladder, certainly cater to the belief among non-cooperative C-fem that womens' personal achievements liberate them from being pressured to settle into conventional marriages with "mediocre men" (Wu & Dong, 2019, p.482).

Indeed, the game design of *Tears of Themis* does not pressure players to settle into any kind of conventional monogamous relationship. Gameplay is separated into three major sections: one major storyline focused on Qiang Wei's cases and career, four side stories each involving a potential romantic relationship with a male character, and "gacha pulls." The term "gacha pulls" comes from the term "gacha game," a type of mobile game in which players exchange in-game currency for virtual items, known as gacha pulls. In *Tears of Themis*, the gacha pulls are delicate portraits of one of the male characters, usually accompanied by voice messages and a romance story that plays out over five to seven scenes of gameplay lasting about 30 minutes. Gacha pulls represent invitations from the male suitors; attempts to win the avatar's favor. However, the player can choose to ignore or accept, either way not influencing the major storyline. If the player likes specifically one of the male characters, she can choose one of the four side stories and ignore the others. If the player prefers more than one of the male characters, she can go through some or all of the four side stories to experience having multiple lovers. If at any point in the gameplay players are not interested in romance, they have the option of not pulling the gacha of any characters. Thus, the design of *Tears of Themis* gives players the freedom from traditional monogamous relationships, and even freedom from the pressure to be involved in any relationships at all.

Qiang Wei's suitors consistently respect and explicitly affirm her choices and lifestyle with slogan-like statements of support. Zuo Ran first expresses his feelings by planning a romantic dinner and asking formally and politely whether she has similar intimate feelings towards him. Rather than pushing her to answer, he says, "It's okay if you feel uncomfortable giving me an answer. I'll always be a step away waiting for your favor" (*Tears of Themis*, 2020, Gacha pull of Zuo Ran, "One Step Away"). Zuo Ran does not want his love to bother or trouble her: instead, he wishes to prevent her from feeling bad if she decides to reject him. Therefore he offers her an easy way to reject him without feeling guilty.

The families of Qiang Wei's suitors also support her non-cooperative lifestyle. Pressure from families to marry early and have children soon is a target of intense resistance from the non-cooperative strand; in 2016, an online publication called Feminist Voices organized an "anti-marriage bombardment" advertising campaign in Beijing subway stations during Chinese New Year, a time when single women experience intense pressure as families gather together for the holiday (Wu & Dong, 2019, p.480). In contrast, in *Tears of Themis*, no family members ever push Qiang Wei to marry early or abandon her career to have children or become a housewife. When Zuo Ran's mother invites Qiang Wei to dinner, she does not criticize her lifestyle or ask about her future plans. Instead, she takes an interest in Qiang Wei's professional accomplishments, asking her opinion on recent cases and praising her insight, intelligence, and dedication to her work (*Tears of Themis*, 2020, Chapter 4 of Zuo Ran's "Yi Mu Story"). Lu JingHe's father also acts respectfully towards Qiang Wei, despite the fact that he is a billionaire, while Qiang Wei comes from an ordinary family. Rather than pressuring Qiang Wei to prove herself to them, he asks Lu JingHe if he needs any help or advice to win Qiang Wei's favor (*Tears of Themis*, 2020, Chapter 4 of Lu JingHe's "Yi Mu Story"). Like Zuo Ran's mother, he praises Qiang Wei for her professional accomplishments and instructs his son to listen to her and adapt and change when necessary, instead of expecting her to adapt for him. Mo Yi's mother veers even farther from the "marriage bombardment" phenomenon, challenging her son as to whether he is rushing into marriage. She urges him to think carefully, expressing, "Hearing what you've described, the only reason you've decided to propose is that you think now is the time to do it" (*Tears of Themis*, 2020, Gacha pull of Mo Yi, "Drown in Ashes"). These parents reflect the non-cooperative attitude that downplays the importance of marriage, refuses to rush, and respects Qiang Wei as an individual with her own life and career.

Thus, the game design of *Tears of Themis* and the characterization of the avatar portray an ideal of femininity strikingly similar to the ideals of non-cooperative C-fem. By centering gameplay around Qiang

Wei's career while de-centering romance, rewarding this lifestyle with pressure-free interest from exceptional suitors, and providing explicit endorsements from the suitors and their families, *Tears of Themis* promotes the idea that educational excellence and professional success are a means of attaining autonomy in one's personal life and the marriage market.

Feminized Male Ideal

Narratives around new ideal female identities also construct new idealized male identities to address changing expectations and values in romantic relationships. Research has revealed the emergence of a new "feminized" male ideal that caters to the values of modern C-fem (Louie, 2012). AY Peng (2019) argues that this new feminized male ideal is not only sexually attractive but also focuses willingly on women's needs and desires. According to Peng, "this feminized male ideal forms an essential part of mythologized interdependent gender relationships, wherein men constantly devote all their attention to their partner or wife's psychological well-being" (Peng, 2019, p.126). This attentiveness can take the form of listening to their partners or doing housework, but more commonly manifests as a willingness to spend money to provide material comfort. Wealth is still idolized; however, it is not as important as the willingness to spend it. The "new good man" who earns less but spends all his excess time and income on his partner is preferable to the "selfish salary warrior" who earns more but spends proportionally less on his partner (Peng, 2019, p.125).

The male characters in the story of *Tears of Themis* are indeed designed to be successful, wealthy, and willing to spend; however, a distinctive difference is that the male characters are not focused solely on spending money, but instead on gifting objects that reflect their feelings and represent the state of relationships. For example, although coming from a billionaire household, Lu JingHe refuses to simply purchase expensive jewelry or clothes as gifts on anniversaries, but instead spends months painting a unique oil portrait of his lover with his own hand (Tears of Themis, 2020, Gacha pull of Lu JingHe, "A Second that Ties Us Forever"). Mo Yi spends months designing a special brooch that symbolizes his dedication to Qiang Wei (Tears of Themis, 2020, Gacha pull of Mo Yi, "Drown in Ashes"). Xia Yan, having grown up with Qiang Wei, handmakes a special music box attached to a crystal globe that records all of their memories to celebrate their past and look forward to their future (Tears of Themis, 2020, Gacha pull of Xia Yan, "Sweat Oranges Dazed My Heart"). All four of the characters also decorate their house keys the way Qiang Wei would like when she decides to move in and live with them, symbolizing her freedom to enter and leave the lives of her suitors as she pleases. These gifts all require abundant time and thought, rather than money. Indeed, the whole story of *Tears of Themis* avoids the trope of men spending money on females and instead emphasizes emotional support, attentiveness and care, even in the smallest details. For example, when Zuo Ran invites Qiang Wei to his house to cook together, he adjusts the height of his kitchen shelves to accommodate their height difference. Unlike traditional romantic relationships that require women to accommodate men, *Tears of Themis* promotes the idea of men adapting to women's lifestyles and needs.

While Peng's (2019) feminized male ideal leans more towards a traditional provider relationship, albeit with greater sensitivity towards female needs, the male characters in *Tears of Themis* nurture Qiang Wei's abilities and encourage her independence. As Qiang Wei and Zuo Ran work together at the Themis Law Firm, Zuo Ran both teaches her many ways to improve and affirms his confidence in her independent work and judgment. After witnessing Qiang Wei's rapid improvement, he praises her work and says that he will be there when she needs him without "constantly providing guidance," expressing confidence in her ability to work autonomously. He explains that he is mentoring her in this way because he supports her ambition to one day "depart from Themis and follow her own path," emphasizing the importance of this aspiration not just for her professional life but for her personal development and life journey (Tears of Themis, 2020, Episode 7 / Chapter 1 of Zuo Ran's "Yi Mu Story"). As both a co-worker and a suitor, Zuo Ran guides and supports Qiang Wei's

growth towards independence, pushing her to hone her professional skills and stressing the significance of self-sufficiency.

Tears of Themis' construction of a feminized male ideal thus differs from the ideal described by Peng (2019), focusing less on material gifts and more on emotional attentiveness and explicit support for professional and personal autonomy. This divergence likely stems from Peng's choice of the blogger Mimeng as the source of her analysis. Mimeng engages in what Peng describes as "a neoliberal feminist discourse... [which] places an emphasis on refining a woman's capacity for housetraining her partner or husband." Although Wu and Dong (2019) avoid the "neoliberal feminism" label because it represents a theoretical framework developed in the Global North, but it is clear that Mimeng's "neoliberal" feminism maps on to their entrepreneurial strand of C-fem, as her posts promote strategies for women to increase their autonomy by marrying a man of wealth and status and ensuring that he will open his pocketbook for her. Thus, the feminized male ideal that emerges in Peng's analysis corresponds to the entrepreneurial strand of C-fem, whereas the ideal on display among the male characters in *Tears of Themis* corresponds to the non-cooperative strand. As such, *Tears of Themis* provides an image of a feminized male ideal that serves the needs of non-cooperative C-fem, emphasizing not only emotional attentiveness but also encouragement of women's professional growth and personal autonomy.

Exposing Violence Against Women and its Concealment

The ideal of femininity on display in *Tears of Themis* is not exclusively concerned with individual success and privilege. Justice is an explicit theme, as Qiang Wei herself says, "the purpose of suing is to inform people that justice exists in the world... in my career as a lawyer, I will never lose faith" (*Tears of Themis*, 2020, Courtroom Trial of Mainstory Episode 5, "The Sound of Snow Fall"). She has become a lawyer not for the money or status, but to make sure everyone can have the chance to receive justice. The cases she takes and the way she manages them serve three important functions. First, they reveal how gender bias and discrimination lead to violence against women. Second, they explain how and why this violence is often hidden, even by the victim herself. Third, they model the appropriate way to treat victims of violence and bring their perpetrators to justice. Through Qiang Wei's sensitive and intelligent support of the female victims of male crimes, *Tears of Themis* not only implicitly critiques a male-dominated society, but also provides a role model for how to treat women who have suffered from it. By modeling how successful women can use their economic and professional status to help other women who have been abused by men, *Tears of Themis* suggests that the ideal of femininity promoted by non-cooperative C-fem is concerned with more than individual privilege and autonomy. Indeed, it implicitly suggests that as educated women achieve economic status and personal autonomy, they should and will use it to aid less fortunate women.

This concern with exposing the structural causes of violence against women can be seen in the case of Sheng Yu, a victim of domestic violence (*Tears of Themis*, 2020, Chapter 2 of Zuo Ran's "Yi Mu Story"). When Sheng Yu's case comes to the law firm, she has been severely beaten by her husband: two of her teeth have been knocked out, and she has bruises all over her body. The violence began when Sheng Yu became separated from her birth family while living with her husband in another city. Over the course of half a year, her husband cuts off her relationships with the outside world, subjecting her to both physical and mental abuse until she feels completely helpless. This storyline reveals the risks women face from their most intimate relationships and the cultural norm of women leaving their own families and homes to join their husbands'. Living in a new city, without a job or a social support network, Sheng Yu is at the mercy of her spouse.

The story structure cleverly reveals why such cases often fail to result in prosecution and justice. Players first learn about the case through Qiang Wei's conversations with Zuo Ran, to whom it has originally been assigned. At first, very few facts come out; nobody at the law firm knows the extent of the abuse or sees a way towards prosecution. However, Qiang Wei takes over as lead attorney because she points out that the victim might be unable to trust a male lawyer. Indeed, Sheng Yu is much more willing to open up to Qiang Wei, telling

enough of her story to put together a case. And yet, when Qiang Wei tells Sheng Yu that she is eligible to prosecute her husband, she refuses, saying, “no, it’s not necessary.” After listening to more stories about her experiences, Qiang Wei realizes that Sheng Yu has fallen into a vicious cycle of learned helplessness. Having tried so many times to escape the violence without success, she has given up hope. By the time she meets Qiang Wei, she has become depressed and cannot believe that her abuser will ever be brought to justice. This story structure thus reveals two reasons why violence against women is often unprosecuted. Players do not learn about the extent of the abuse until Qiang Wei takes over the case, demonstrating the pitfalls of an economic and legal system where those responsible for justice are nearly all men. Then, presumably feeling confident in their case after gathering all the details from the victim, players are suddenly faced with a surprising new hurdle: the psychological damage to the victim herself, which makes her unwilling to prosecute.

Despite facing these hurdles, Qiang Wei exemplifies the proper way to aid a victim of domestic violence and prevent its recurrence; as the chapter progresses, she not only achieves justice in the case, but spends significant time outside of her official work helping Sheng Yu achieve economic and personal stability and independence. When Qiang Wei realizes that Sheng Yu has developed symptoms of psychological trauma from long-term abuse, she consults with public mental health services. They explain that Sheng Yu needs a safe environment and a job to re-establish her relationship with society and regain a sense of control. Qiang Wei thus prepares materials to help Sheng Yu apply for a new job and obtain an independent residence. Feeling cared for and increasing in confidence, Sheng Yu finds the courage to sue, and with Qiang Wei as her lawyer, wins the case. From beginning to end, Qiang Wei explicitly encourages Sheng Yu to achieve autonomy through economic empowerment. When they win the case and Sheng Yu receives an offer for her new job, Qiang Wei goes to a jewelry store and buys her a gift. Sheng Yu initially refuses, protesting that she “does not deserve such expensive gifts,” but Qiang Wei tells her that she deserves this reward for her strength (Tears of Themis, 2020, Episode 7 / Chapter 2 of Zuo Ran’s “Yi Mu Story”). Gracefully encouraging her economic autonomy, Qiang Wei relents and agrees that Sheng Yu can pay her back for the jewelry if she still desires after working for some time and saving money. In this way, she helps Sheng Yu to rebuild her confidence and gives her hope for the future without hurting her ego. As they part, Qiang Wei reminds Sheng Yu that she is the main character of her own life, not anyone or anything else (Tears of Themis, 2020, Chapter 2 of Zuo Ran’s “Yi Mu Story”).

In the case of Hang Jiahe, a young woman who was sold into effective slavery as a foster child, *Tears of Themis* reveals additional reasons why structural inequality and gender discrimination both cause and conceal violence against women (Tears of Themis, 2020, Main Story Episode 7, “Rain of Monte Cristo”). The story begins with Jiahe’s mother selling Jiahe to a foster family in exchange for money and resources. This reflects a deep-seated attitude in China known as “son preference” (zhongnanqingnǚ), which is particularly prevalent in poorer, rural areas (ZhongGuoXinWenWang [China News], 2017). Families are more likely to abort a pregnancy when a girl is expected, which has led to a gender ratio at birth of 113.3 females per 100 males, significantly higher than the normal range of 103-107 (ZhongGuoZhengFuWang [China Government Net], 2021). Since this traditional attitude means females will not carry on the family line, the practice of demanding large dowries at marriage is still widespread, leading to the widespread belief that marriage is in some ways akin to selling a daughter to another family (ZhongZhengWang [China Securities Journal], 2017). Hang Jiahe, sold by her family as a young child, is repeatedly beaten and raped by her foster father, Hang Fei, a serial abuser of young women. As in Sheng Yu’s case, *Tears of Themis* shows not only how these situations arise, but also how they can result in psychological damage that makes the victims reluctant to seek justice because of the trauma of reliving their experiences. It also demonstrates how Jiahe’s abuser is able to take advantage of both gender discrimination and his own wealth and social connections to silence his victims. When Qiang Wei asks why Jiahe has never exposed these crimes to the police for so many years, Jiahe explains that Hang Fei is a wealthy entrepreneur who has the necessary relationships to hide his crime. In addition, he has threatened to publicize photos of her naked and a video of her being raped, a method of control he has used against many of his victims. Jiahe explains that she and Hang Fei’s other victims are afraid that after such images go public, they will be

unable to marry: no longer virgins, with nude images exposed to the public, they will be considered “dirty,” and ineligible for all but the worst marriages, if any at all. In this manner, *Tears of Themis* unflinchingly reveals how the shame of losing one’s virginity and being considered “dirty” by society is a form of structural inequality that allows rapists to escape from jail. Players learn that countless rape victims refuse to show evidence or prosecute because of the unfair punishments and expectations placed on women.

Tears of Themis’s concerns with justice display an attribute of non-cooperative C-fem that is easily missed in its emphasis on personal success and autonomy. As Wu and Dong (2019) point out, “Women who associate with this strand are more likely to take risks and participate in open protests targeting government practices and legislations.” Although the ideal of femininity represented by Qiang Wei in *Tears of Themis* never explicitly targets “government practices and legislations,” it leaves no doubt that non-cooperative C-fem is aware of the dangers to women posed by an unequal power structure. Detective-style storylines expose how culturally rooted gender discrimination puts women in dangerous situations and how unequal economic and social power is a barrier to prosecution. Qiang Wei’s explicit dedication to justice and her compassionate treatment of clients like Yu Sheng expresses the idea that successful women can and should use their power to help less fortunate women and increase their collective power.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the narratives of femininity in *Tears of Themis* through three aspects: autonomous womanhood, a feminized male ideal, and the violence against women in a male-dominated society. The female avatar Qiang Wei presents an ideal of womanhood that resembles the ideals of “noncooperative C-fem” by avoiding conventional romance and marriage, and instead focusing on educational and professional achievement as a means to autonomy and independence. The male characters and their families construct a feminized male ideal that caters to the aspirations of non-cooperative C-fem through explicitly respecting and supporting the avatar’s lifestyle and career, while the game design of *Tears of Themis* permits absolute freedom over unconventional non-exclusive relationships without any narrative or structural pressure to commitment to monogamy and marriage. The detective-style main storyline reveals how unequal power structures lead to social inequalities, and further trigger violence against women and its concealment. In addition, by portraying Qiang Wei’s dedication towards justice and support of other women, *Tears of Themis* implicitly expresses the idea that successful and autonomous women are concerned with strengthening collective female power and not merely their own status. In essence, *Tears of Themis* offers a compelling reflection of an important strand of contemporary Chinese feminism. As it navigates love, power, and hidden violence, it envisions and blueprints a transformation triggered by unconventional choices in career and romance, and a commitment to uncovering and resisting injustice.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

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