

# Ethic in the Films: How *Zuoyou* Explores Moral Problems Associated with Choice?

Chutian Liu

The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland, EH8 9YL, UK

---

**Abstract:** This paper asserts the complementary relationship between film and philosophy, using basic ethical theories to interpret the empathetic moral dilemmas presented in *Zuoyou*. *Zuoyou* presents a real-life inspired story where a divorced couple must decide whether to conceive a child naturally to save their daughter from leukemia. This narrative is analyzed within the context of Chinese cultural moral relativism and compared with Western perspectives on life ethics. The paper argues that the film's modern Chinese setting and the characters' middle-class identities challenge traditional ethical norms and reflect the complexity of ethical decision-making in contemporary society. On top of this, the paper emphasizes the importance of film in understanding human existence and the role of philosophy in analyzing film's ethical expressions.

**Keywords:** Film Philosophy, Ethical Theory, Moral Dilemma.

---

## 1. Introduction

There have been many negative voices about whether film can be discussed as a serious art. As Dan Shaw describes, many people believe that “movies are popular entertainments, notorious for their relative mindlessness and designed to allow us to escape from our problems, not think about them” (Shaw, 2012, p.1). In response to this misunderstanding, Amy Coplan argues that “phenomena such as ‘emotional contagion’ are particularly powerful in the cinema compared with the other arts” (Coplan, 2006, p.26). In other words, in contrast to other art forms (such as literature or theatre), film has the ability to elicit and direct a powerful active engagement and emotional response through visual, perceptual and aesthetic means. To this Robert Sinnerbrink further adds,

This observation is of great importance for thinking about morality and ethics in film. If moral judgment is grounded in affective and emotional responsiveness, with reflective judgment serving to clarify, organize, and rationalize our more emotively grounded appraisals, then cinema’s power to engage us affectively, emotionally, and reflectively at once means that it has a powerful ethical potential to move viewers towards distinctive patterns of moral allegiance (Sinnerbrink, 2015, p.140).

It is true that more and more films tend to talk about national sentiments, marital fidelity, behavioural eccentricities and other topics related to morality, and have more or less provoked some discussions. In fact, just like film is not as superficial as people think, philosophy is not such “a serious and esoteric field” (Shaw, 2012, p.1) either. As Amy Karofsky and Mary M. Litch claim, “Of all the subareas of philosophy, moral philosophy (also known as ‘ethics’) is the one that is most familiar to nonphilosophers” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.145). Therefore, this essay will take the film *Zuo you* (In Love We Trust, Xiaoshuai Wang, 2008) as an example to analyse how it explores moral problems associated with choice with the knowledge of moral philosophy.

## 2. Ethical Theories

Before exploring the film, it is necessary to figure out what

moral philosophy is. According to Karofsky and Litch, “moral philosophy is concerned with figuring out what distinguishes morally right actions from morally wrong actions” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.145). This view is also held by Shaw, who believes that “philosophical ethics has two primary tasks: 1) justifying a universal standard for moral judgment (or arguing that such a standard is impossible) and 2) applying those standards to concrete moral issues” (Shaw, 2012, p.2). This is to say, different philosophers express their views mainly on what such “standard” is, and thus develop different theories.

Ethical theories fall into two main categories: moral relativism and moral objectivism. According to moral relativism, “there are no objective moral facts: the truth of all moral evaluations is relative either to individual or cultural moral standards” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.148). This further gives rise to the two main branches of moral relativism, moral subjectivism, which believes that “the individual is the final arbiter of morality”, and cultural moral relativism, which claims that “the culture is the final arbiter of morality” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.167). There is also a view, known as moral nihilism, holds that moral statements are meaningless. However, as this view “was popular early in the twentieth century” and “does not have many followers among current philosophers” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.149), it will not be discussed in this essay.

Moral objectivism is contrasted with moral relativism. This view states that “there are moral facts—facts about what is morally right and morally wrong, facts that do not depend on what anyone or any group of people happens to think” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.148). There are a few more branches of moral objectivism. Firstly, because some theories “view the consequences that arise from an action as decisive in determining the moral status of that action” and other ethical theories “ignore consequences altogether” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.147), consequentialism and nonconsequentialism have arisen. Consequentialism is the view that “what sets morally right actions apart from morally wrong ones has to do with the consequences that result from the action” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.153). In other words, morally right actions produce good consequences while morally wrong actions produce bad consequences.

Nonconsequentialism, on the other hand, is the view that “it is something other than consequences that is important in distinguishing right from wrong” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.153), such as the intentions of the actor.

Secondly, consequentialism and nonconsequentialism both develop differently within themselves, depending on the focus of different philosophers. Consequentialism is distinguished as act utilitarianism and moral egoism by the different beneficiaries of the consequences. Act utilitarianism is “an action that is right if it maximizes overall happiness” while moral egoism is “an action that is right if it maximizes the actor’s happiness” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.167). According to act utilitarianism, acting morally right is to figure out which action will maximize overall happiness, and choose that action. The theory is egalitarian, which means that “everyone’s happiness needs to be considered” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.157). This is to say, act utilitarianism requires us to consider everyone affected and everyone is treated equally. The person who makes the decision is equal to anyone else and we should take the overall amount of (un)happiness caused by the decision. Another version of utilitarianism, moral egoism, supports that “the only person whose happiness matters in determining the moral status of an action is the actor” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.160). Thus, if the one who makes the decision gains maximum happiness when he/she performs action X, then action X is the morally right thing to do. This view focuses on long-term happiness which means behaviours that will give pleasure in the short term but cause suffering in the long term are not considered morally right.

Of all the nonconsequentialism theories, Immanuel Kant’s should be introduced first. Kant’s ethical theory states that “an act is morally right if the general principle the actor is following in performing that action is a principle that the actor can and does will others to act in accordance with” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.162) and “it is always wrong to treat a fellow rational agent (that is, a member of ‘humanity’) merely as an instrument to achieve one’s own goals, without concern for that person as an autonomous agent with his or her own goals, desires, capacity for decision-making, and so on” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.164). This is in effect saying, an action is right based on the actor’s intentions with the precondition that he/she is purely rational. There are also branches of nonconsequentialism that arise because of whether they relate to the will of God, but since the issue of religious belief is not present in *Zuo you*, we will leave it aside for the moment.

### 3. Ethical Dilemmas in *Zuo you*

The story of *Zuo you* is based on a real-life news story. Hehe (Chuan Zhang), the daughter of the main character, Mei Zhu (Weiwei Liu), and her ex-husband, Xiao Lu (Jiayi Zhang), is suffering from leukaemia. Although Mei Zhu and Xiao Lu both have new spouses, they have to face the situation together. After a mismatch of blood types and the failure of artificial insemination, Mei Zhu and Xiao Lu choose to have natural sexual intercourse in order to conceive a new baby and use the baby’s umbilical cord blood to save Hehe.

This is a story kernel that perfectly supports cultural moral relativism. It is a narrative that is so polarising to the Chinese that most people would be unable to choose. But to many Westerners, it does not even seem to be a moral dilemma. The West was further ahead of the East in recognising that respect for life is better than ethics. For example, in *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998), even more people are

sacrificed to save Ryan’s life. So that the failure of artificial insemination and the need to have sex with the ex-husband to save the child in *Zuo you* are not seen as a very difficult issue in the West. According to Derek Elley, the film has “pic’s dogged rhythm and flawed script, combined with an overlong running time”, and does not “make the plot development believable” (Elley, 2008, 26). She even calls the film a “black comedy”. However, as Herodotus, the principal historian of the classical era, notes that, “even in ancient times, differences between social norms of different cultures were apparent” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.148). The film *Zuo you* is full of tension under the ethical norms of rituals and ethics that have prevailed in China for thousands of years. In the Chinese cultural context, Mei Zhu’s actions to save her child are morally and ethically correct to begin with, but the way in which she saves her life is absolutely immoral. As Mei Zhu’s current husband, Lao Xie (Taishen Cheng), says, “It’s not as simple as you think” and “I’m afraid there are few people in the world who can accept this kind of thing”. The conflict, challenge and even disobedience to traditional Chinese family ethics is evident in this individual ethical narrative.

At the same time, director Wang’s expression of ethics can be seen in two adaptations of the story’s prototype. One is the complication of the story’s characters’ relationships. In reality, none of the archetypes remarry; in the film, two remarried families are created. The other important change is that the identity of the characters has been changed considerably. In reality, the characters are from Guizhou (a relatively backward region of southwest China) and are a couple with little education working in freight transport; in the film, they are set in Beijing (the capital of China) and the characters are set as a housing agent, an engineer, a building contractor and a flight attendant.

The uneducated couple who work as freight drivers are replaced with clearly defined identities such as housing agents, engineers, flight attendants, building contractors, etc. These identities in the film’s narrative all have a distinctive character, namely belonging to the middle class living in the city. The emergence of the middle class is inextricably linked to the modernisation of the market economy brought about by the reform and opening up in China, and this group is contemporary and somewhat different from the traditional, old ideological ethics and values. In other words, the director places the ethical issue in a “modern” Chinese context, where traditional ethical norms are no longer sufficient to solve the current dilemma, and where the relationship between ethics and life should be seen and dealt with in the face of new problems. The title of the film, *Zuo you* (means “left or right” in English), is a reflection of this confusion and tussle.

Such changes also make moral subjectivism count. It is on the basis of this displacement of the modern context that Mei Zhu is able to find her way through the ethical cracks, or at least convince herself that having sex with her ex-husband to save her child is not a sin. It is also on the basis of moral subjectivism that Lao Xie, Mei Zhu’s current husband, and Dong Fan (Nan Yu), Xiao Lu’s current wife, are able to choose to accommodate Mei Zhu and Xiao Lu based on their own moral standard of observation and judgement. In addition, in the 2022’s TV version of *Zuo you*, Mei Zhu becomes a secondary school teacher and Dong Fan becomes a news editor, both making their respective identities more compatible with the moral judgements they might make. This may be based precisely on considerations of moral subjectivism which believes individual is the final arbiter of

morality.

At the same time, with the change to two remarried families, the relationship between the characters in the narrative builds a more complex interpersonal ethical network, so that in the face of life and ethical dilemmas, the words, emotions, psychological and behavioural choices of the different characters can be presented in full, and the multiple narrative ethics enrich the tension of the drama, while also bringing the characters into the realm of act utilitarianism and moral egoism.

According to act utilitarianism, “an action that produces overall good consequences is morally preferable to an action that produces overall poor consequences” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.147). So, what should we say about Mei Zhu’s desire to have another child with her ex-husband Xiao Lu? The conclusion leaves no doubt that, in accordance with act utilitarianism, it is immoral. First of all, this act has caused great harm to Lao Xie and Dong Fan. In the film, Lao Xie is a typical Chinese father figure, calm and introverted, giving selfless love to his stepdaughter and compromising step by step with his wife, using his forgiveness to guard a special family. But life is unfair to him. For the sake of Hehe, Mei Zhu aborts her child with Lao Xie, and for the sake of Hehe, Mei Zhu wants to have another child with her ex-husband,

and all this means that Lao Xie can no longer have his own child. It’s not that there was no conflict, nor was there no struggle, but when faced with the person he has to love and protect, all the pain is just put in the deepest part of his heart and never revealed. In the play, whenever Lao Xie encountered a problem that was difficult to solve, he would go downstairs to buy a pack of cigarettes, stand quietly in front of his house for a while, then clear his complex emotions and go home with a relaxed smile (Figure 1). Although Lao Xie never shows his pain, we can see how he digests it in the dissipation of a single cigarette. On the contrary, Dong Fan’s pain is evident. There is a resigned struggle in her, faced with the noble moral proposition of saving a life (even though she has never met before), she can only choose to hold back or withdraw forever. Under the pressure of social and family responsibilities, she is unable to realise her deepest desire to have a child, to have a warm family. Both Lao Xie and Dong Fan choose to be tolerant, understanding and forgiving in the end, which appears to be for the sake of greater overall happiness, but the pain they themselves have suffered cannot be measured. Not to mention the fact that we cannot measure the pain that the unborn child would have endured if he had known this. Therefore, from act utilitarianism’s point of view, Mei Zhu’s choice is clearly unethical.



Figure 1. Lao Xie smokes in front of his home.

In fact, utilitarianism is not quite perfect. According to Karofsky and Litch, “utilitarianism doesn’t recognize the notion of a right” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.158). For example, Mei Zhu has the right to abortion and the right to conceive anyone’s child if she wishes. But this statement does not argue that her choice was moral, even on an egoistic basis, it is difficult to draw such a conclusion. Although in the short term, having another child with Xiao Lu relieves the feeling of powerlessness that Mei Zhu is unable to save Hehe and appears to maximise her personal happiness. But in the long run, choosing to save Hehe in this way will inevitably destroy the lives of her current family and Xiao Lu’s current family. Although this life is temporarily balanced by Lao Xie and Dong Fan’s patience, there is no way to know what consequences this hidden danger will bring in the future. On the other hand, the end of the film does not even give an account of whether Hehe was saved. If not, what the future of Hehe will be, what the future of the newborn child will be, and what the future of the two reunited families will be, all are unknown. As Karofsky and Litch claims, “there are so

many events that could occur in the future and so many factors to take into account that it is impossible for him to accurately predict and compute the sum total happiness of either action” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.159). Therefore, from moral egoism’s point of view, it is difficult to make a moral judgement on Mei Zhu’s choice.

In the analysis of *Gone Baby Gone* (Ben Affleck, 2007), Karofsky and Litch suggest that “Whereas the consequentialist theories cannot provide a clear assessment of Doyle’s action (at least not until the future unfolds), Kant’s theory is able to offer a judgment of Doyle’s action, even before he decides to do it” (Karofsky & Litch, 2014, p.165). So is it possible to judge Mei Zhu’s behaviour using Kant’s theory? Despite her good intentions at first, it is clear from her step-by-step pushing of Xiao Lu that she actually sees him as her tool to save Hehe, which creates a contradiction within Kant’s theory. On the other hand, Mei Zhu does not seem to be a purely rational person; she is not rational, nor even pure. This is evident from the embarrassment at the end of the film when she and Xiao Lu are hesitant to have sex (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Mei Zhu and Xiao Lu lie awkwardly on the bed.

#### 4. Conclusion

There is an increasingly correct understanding of the relationship between film and philosophy. If the two are forcibly divided, as Josef Frùchtl and Sarah L. Kirkby describe,

Film would lose that interpretational authority which makes it so much more than mere entertainment, namely by exposing film's significance (its implied sense and thus importance) for human existence, at least for human existence within a certain age. Vice versa, philosophy would lose an area of interpretation and analysis enabling its essential tasks-or at least some of them-and thus an essential part of its self-conception to be fulfilled (Frùchtl & Kirkby, 2013, p.146).

This essay is an analysis of how *Zuo you* explores the moral problems associated with choice, using knowledge of ethical theory in philosophy. This essay holds the view that cinema and philosophy are complementary and, on this basis, explains the most empathetic moral dilemmas in the film using basic ethical theories. This might be a complement to

the ethical expressions that the director has hidden in this film.

#### References

- [1] Coplan, A. (2006). Catching Characters Emotions: Emotional Contagion Responses to Narrative Fiction Film. *Film Studies*, 8(1), 26–38.
- [2] Elley, D. (2008). In Love We Trust. *Variety*, 410(2), 26-.
- [3] Frùchtl, J. (2017). Trust in the world: A philosophy of film / by Josef Frùchtl ; translated by Sarah L. Kirkby. New York: Routledge.
- [4] Litch, M. M. (2015). Philosophy through film / Mary M. Litch, Amy Karofsky. (Third edition.). New York; Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- [5] Shaw, D. (2012). *Morality and the Movies: Reading Ethics Through Film*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- [6] Sinnerbrink, R. (2016). *Cinematic ethics: Exploring ethical experience through film* / Robert Sinnerbrink. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.