

The Fate of Real Women Reflected by the Film *New Women*

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ABSTRACT

The *New Woman* is a left-wing film in 1930s that calls for women's independence. This paper analyzes three typical women with different ideal pursuits in the film and then reflects on a social phenomenon revealed by the film. It concludes that under the influence of left-wing thought, there appeared some initial enlightenment independent women of different classes. But turbulent society and deep-rooted gender prejudices make the new women's path to independence even harder.

Keywords: *New Women, Left wing, Female Independence, Reality*

1. INTRODUCTION

New Women, a film by Cai Chusheng in 1934, is one of Ruan Lingyu's most famous works during her acting career. The film *New Women* is based on the ill-fated actress Ai Xia, but the images depicted in the film are not limited to her, but three representative images of modern women, who are a desperate suicide woman, a vain and male-dependent woman, and a revolutionary struggling woman.

The genius of the film is exaggerated dramatic means of expression and realistic authenticity of the unity of opposites, which push the *New Women* to the peak of public debate. The love-hate relationships of several couples and the fates of the female characters are really fascinating and impressive. This paper appreciates the character image through certain aspect of the film performance and discusses its unity of opposites with the fate of women in the real society. The main topic is to analyze the relationship between fictional characters in literary works and social reality, which indicates that the macro-class antagonism of an era can be condensed into the fate of several lifelike characters.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Professor Wen Jiangbin claims in his paper *The Collision and Transcendence of Ideology and Commercial Discourse -- A Review of the Film New Women*, "In the shaping of Weiming, on the one hand, the film takes women's fashion and knowledge as the

narrative carrier of visual consumption; on the other hand, this woman who represents modernity places the antagonism and social contradiction between the times and social classes"[1]; Professor Zhou Xuan points out in her paper *On the Authenticity and Drama in the New Women of the Republic of China Film*, "when the film expressed left-wing artists' doubts and criticism of the spirit of enlightenment during the May Fourth Movement, it also borrowed the mode of 'revolution plus love', which was popular in the literary world at that time to attract audiences[2]". Based on the views of the two professors above, this paper will take the details of the movie scenes and plots as examples to carry out the image analysis and reflection on the social phenomenon of the three types of modern women.

3. ANALYSIS ON ENTANGLED AND DESPERATE SEMI-REVOLUTIONARY WOMAN: WEI MING

As the title suggests, Wei Ming is a middle figure caught between two extremes.

Compared with Mrs. Wang, a lady who is totally dependent on men, and Li Aying, a laboring woman at the bottom of the rigid revolution, Wei Ming is in the middle of two opposing classes. This contradiction is reflected in the whole film.

WeiMing, as a new woman, has been labeled as "intellectual and fashionable". She is charming, educated in the new way, free to love, and has a place of

her own in the upper classes. However, in the social situation at that time, whenever Wei Ming pursued the so-called freedom and independence, she was constantly ravaged by the reality, which led her to struggle and despair. She pursued free love, but the abandonment of the heartless man made her have to wander alone in Shanghai; She tried to live, but Dr. Wang's evil thoughts and selfishness, caused her lost job; and later sick daughter, and poor plight, forced her to betray the flesh, and finally suffered the insult of personality; Even on her deathbed, she was subjected to vilification in the press.

When watching the film for the first time, the audience may put Wei Ming in the exploited class, but once again, it is not difficult to find that Wei Ming's image is struggling in contradiction. She is just like a

duckweed floating between the upper and lower classes of society. She spats on the stinking capitalists, and hopes to gain respect from others only by her personal efforts, but when Dr. Wang covets her beauty, brings her to the high-class dinner party and makes friends with the powerful, she does not refuse, even though she clearly knows that Dr. Wang is a man of family.

Here is a very impressive plot in the movie. There is a walking clock in the center of the scene, when the laboring woman Li Aying is working hard in the factory production, Wei Ming and Dr. Wang are socializing and dancing in an upper-class dinner. This scene splits Wei Ming and Dr. Wang with Li Aying very clearly. (As shown in figure 1) At least right now, they belong to two opposite classes. Wei Ming is the new woman of capital society while Li Aying represents the work class.

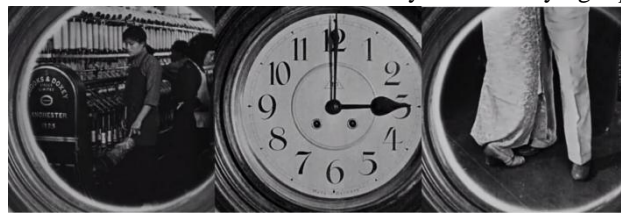


Figure 1 Life of Two Classes at 3 P.M

On the other hand, Wei Ming in the film seemed to be very secretive about the fact that she had been married and had a child. Actually she was ashamed to confess her past to Yu Hai Chou, the man she loved, and never mentioned it to anyone else. WeiMing still to divorce shameful, which can be seen that her love conception is not completely advanced.

Professor Chen Mo suggests in his paper About the New Woman: Conceptual Framework and Group Psychology that “In traditional Chinese sexual morality, even the upper-class family still considered it shameful for women to remarry, advocated that women should not have two husbands during their lifetime, and praised abstinence. At the same time, some feudal superstitions held that a woman was ‘unclean’ during menstruation and after giving birth.[3]” Indeed, this inherent, without eradication of the thought has been residual in the concept of Wei Ming.

The image of Wei Ming in the film is actually the epitome of many intellectual young women in Chinese society at that time. They are educated, beautiful and independent, but they still cannot compete with capital and reality. Even though such new women are the intellectual youth of petty capital, they have certain superiority and advanced nature, they still have to bow before the big capital.

This is the helpless of the reality, but also the sadness of the society.

4. ANALYSIS ON STUBBORN AND MALE-DEPENDENT NON-REVOLUTIONARY WOMAN: MRS. WANG

Mrs. Wang is a typical rich wife of the Republic of China period, who also received new education, but her thought enlightenment course is obviously inferior to Wei Ming. She is a modern woman, but not a new woman. That is a strong backwardness in Mrs. Wang’s mind.

In the movie, when she found her husband hid Wei Ming’s photo, frequented brothels and had affairs with prostitutes, she flew into a rage and shouted at her husband for being unfaithful to her. However, once Dr. Wang put her off with a lot of money, Mrs. Wang suddenly changed her attitude and was so docile to her husband that she seemed to have forgotten his infidelity. It can be seen that she was extremely dependent on man economically. What makes people feel sad and hateful is that on the matter of Dr. Wang's malign intentions against Weiming, Mrs. Wang still stubbornly stood on her husband's side and insulted Wei Ming as a shameless home wrecker who seduced her husband. The same as a woman, but Mrs. Wang not only did not sympathize with Wei Ming, but also even pushed her to a darker bottomless abyss.

In real life, Mrs. Wang represents those rich wives who are full of arrogance and extravagance, and live completely dependent on men without their own spiritual world. They are numb and destined to be a

man's lifelong accessory, but not themselves. Just like Mrs. Wang in the movie, she only wears her husband's surname, but has no name of her own from beginning to end.

Vulgarity and numbness is the tragedy of Mrs. Wang, but may since she has not been "civilized" in mind to the same degree as Wei Ming, and her life is not too much entanglement and pain. She doesn't feel insulted when accepts male material alms. Compared with Wei Ming's painful death, is she more lucky? Perhaps When Wei ming was disgusted by Mrs. Wang's excessive dependence on men, Mrs. Wang was also laughing at WeiMing's self-righteous lofty. This was the tragic fate of women in 1930s China, where "sprouted new ideas and solidified old ideas contradicted".

5. ANALYSIS ON RADICAL REVOLUTIONARY WOMEN: LI AYING

The evaluation of Li Aying is mixed: as an independent and strong labor woman, she pursues reform, as if she is like the tumbler doll of Wei Ming, and will never fall. This is the image of a woman that Left-wing Movements have trumpeted and celebrated.

However, another comment criticized Li Aying's image as too fake, without blood or flesh. Quoting Chen Xuan's opinion, "In the film, the left-wing values also clearly define the image and power of new women. Li Aying is not only resolute and strong in spirit and thought, but also begins to defeminize her appearance and physique.[2]"

In the film, Wei Ming and Mrs Wang was always dressed up, wearing a slim cheongsam, which completely showed female charm. But Li Aying was quite different. It is reasonable that as a working woman, her clothes would be relatively simple, but she did not wear any feminine clothes or accessories. Her daily dress were always a coarse cloth jacket and trousers, which deliberately weakened the femininity and blurred the boundary of gender.

Furthermore, Li Aying's power is also beyond the ordinary women, she can easily break the wooden stick, and fight with Dr. Wang alone. (Shown in Figure 2) This may seem far-fetched, but it is precisely what the Left-wing Movement calls ---- ---- " Women who are tough enough can save themselves". The left-wing was seen at the time as being advanced in justice, like Ding Yaping and Ji Xinlei write in their paper *The Revolutionary Writing of Film: Left-wing Ideology and Chinese Film in the Hundred Years*, "After Left-wing entered the film field, it became a synonym for revolution and progress. It constructed an ideological discourse that regarded ignorance, slavery, corruption and superstition as opposites, and presented a rich revolutionary significance and a complex and unique

appearance in the Chinese films of one hundred years.[4]"

Although the image of Li Aying is a little flat, we have to admit that it is the best ideal for the rise of women in the society at that time: women carry out revolution by their own power, abandon the vulgar love, and become a real strong steel woman. As Wang Yanling and Jia Ru mentioned in paper *What is the "New Woman"?* Design culture and gender segregation in the 1930s as seen from film sets, "A 'ying's value orientation is not to 'stable life, friendship, love and female chastity', but to believe in serving the public, is a proletarian worker with advanced thought.[5]" The director Cai Chusheng also explained: "We use this symbolic method to form a sharp contrast between li A ying, a female worker with lofty ideals and revolutionary spirit, and Weiming, a weak and uncertain intellectual woman."[6]



Figure 2 Li Aying

6. CONCLUSION

Overall, *New Women* is one of the most influential films of the 1930s. The idea that women should be independent and struggle advocated by the film set off a huge wave in the society at that time. Even today, we have to be shocked by Mr. Cai Chusheng's profound advanced ideas and wonderful shooting methods.

The three types of women mainly depicted in this film also revealed to the world the real situation of women in the turbulent period of the Republic of China, when the tide of new thoughts and left-wing thoughts were advancing together.

It can be said that life is like a play, a play is like life. Film *New Women* tells the story of three women's totally different fate, but also alludes to millions of women who suffer from the oppression of capital and male power.

As modern women, we are lucky to born in a relatively gender equality era, but also feel compassion by the oppression of women in the movie. It should be

called on all women to unite, dare to say no to all gender prejudice, firmly safeguard their rights – strive to obtain a higher level of education, and contribute to the cause of women's independence with knowledge.

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