

Public Pedagogy, Popular Culture and Feminine Consciousness Awakening

The Educational Significance of the Documentary Film *Leftover Women*

Yadi Xu^{1,*}

¹ Faculty of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, The Education University of Hong Kong, 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, New Territories, Hong Kong

*Corresponding author. Email: s1136261@s.edu.hk

ABSTRACT

With the evolution of education, teaching and learning not only take place within the formal education system, but also outside of schools. This interdisciplinary, multiple, lifelong learning pedagogy is referred as public pedagogy. Popular culture, with its function of reproducing and challenging hegemony, is considered to be a vital instrument of public pedagogy. The purpose of this article is to explore the educational significance of popular culture as public pedagogy. It adopts a discourse analysis approach through a documentary film *Leftover Women* to discuss about how popular culture facilitates feminine consciousness awakening and public's learning. Finally, the article reveals that popular culture as public pedagogy has both entertainment and educative values.

Keywords: Public pedagogy, Popular Culture, Leftover women, Gender inequality, Feminine consciousness awakening

1. INTRODUCTION

Under the influence of a large culture, people are constantly being educated [1]. Nowadays, learning and teaching not only take place within the formal school system, but also in any public place, forming informal learning. That is, commonly known as public pedagogy. The importance of this pedagogy beyond schooling has been emphasized by scholars as it has educational implication for lifelong learning. Popular culture, as a reproduction mode of culture, is a common tool of public pedagogy, as well as an essential field of cultural research and adult education research. The purpose of this article is to explore the educational significance of popular culture as public pedagogy. It draws on how popular culture promotes feminine awareness awakening and public's learning through a documentary film, *Leftover Women*. The article begins with an introduction about public pedagogy. Then it illustrates the role of popular culture as vehicle for public pedagogy. Next, it provides a discourse analysis of documentary film *Leftover Women*. Finally, the educational significance of film is discussed.

2. PUBLIC PEDAGOGY AND POPULAR CULTURE

Education is a diverse, evolving, and comprehensive concept. Pedagogy, as the centre of education, is the fundamental way to implement education. Given the part-whole relationship between pedagogy and education, pedagogy evolves with the continual development of education.

2.1. Public Pedagogy

We can understand public pedagogy in three dimensions. First, public pedagogy is not only concerned with the private and formal schooling, but also focuses on a form of education that is outside of formal education. It is a practice of teaching and learning that is not limited to space, context and form [1]. Students are not the only beneficiaries of learning since public pedagogy can serve the public [1]. Second, it breaks the boundaries between various disciplines as an interdisciplinary tool for teaching and learning [2]. Moreover, it is not limited to time either, but a life-long learning approach to education.

2.2. Popular Culture as Public Pedagogy

In the early 1990s, as the education research orientation focused on cultural studies during this period, numerous adult educators drew attention to the educative value of popular culture. Public pedagogy was widely used in the form of popular culture in time [3]. Popular culture as a site of public pedagogy was first found in feminist studies, which created a space for women to resist the inequality of social status and promote the feminist movement [4]. Since the late 1990s to present, popular culture as a vehicle for public pedagogy is no longer confined to feminist studies, instead, it is a site of socialization, an arena where hegemony is reproduced and challenged [5].

2.3. The Role of Popular Culture

First, seeking for identity. Popular culture works such as films, television dramas, and books can help inform the public's identity by presenting discourses of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation, so that shaping their worldviews. Second, reproducing and challenging the hegemony. As mentioned above, popular culture works reproduce class struggle, racism, sexism, violence, patriarchy and other oppressions in social reality, leading the public to concern these social issues [6] [7]. Through the oppression and resistance conveyed in popular culture, the public put the upright ideology shaped by popular culture into practice in daily life, and this is the ultimate goal of popular culture as a public pedagogy [6]. In the following, this article will take the documentary film as an example and investigate what we can learn from it.

3. THE EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DOCUMENTARY FILM *LEFTOVER WOMEN*

In recent years, the "leftover women" phenomenon has drawn wide attention in Chinese mass media, particularly in popular culture and social media platforms, sparking heated discussions. The term *leftover women* refer to women in their late twenties who have reached marriageable age but remain single. Some believe that it is a social phenomenon in which an increasing number of women are deferring marriage or even choosing not to get married. This phenomenon may jeopardize social harmony, resulting in social problems. Others argue that this term stigmatizes single women that implies sexism. Above all, this article uses the documentary film to understand the leftover women phenomenon and investigate the educational significance of film as a form of public pedagogy. Following, it selects three themes from the documentary film and adopts discourse analysis for discussion.

3.1. Background of the Documentary Film

The documentary film, directed by two Israeli female directors, tells the story of three single Chinese career women labeled "leftover women" who are under pressure from their families and society. Here in this article, we will only discuss one of the characters Qiu Huamei. Qiu Huamei, a 34-year-old lawyer who has lived in Beijing for many years, comes from a rural area in Binzhou City, Shandong Province. Qiu's family is not wealthy, with five sisters and she is the youngest. Despite this, her parents and sisters did their best to support her education. Qiu lived up to their expectations and was admitted to a university in Beijing. After graduation, she worked for a famous law firm in Beijing through her own efforts.

3.2. Theme 1 - Parental Pressure

This scene, Qiu's father kept leading the conversation that Qiu was old and should get married as soon as possible, and her sisters joined in by using words like "rare" and "not normal" to irritate Qiu.

Qiu's father: "You should consider getting married. Honestly, I'm very worried. The law says that people should get married in their 20s, but you are over 30 years old and still not married."

Qiu: "Why should I get married? What are the benefits of getting married?"

Qiu's father: "It's not about benefits, it's all about you should get married when you're at the right age. Whenever people ask me if you're married, I have nothing to say."

Qiu's sister: "Since your job is stable, you should get married as soon as possible."

Qiu: "I've thought about it, and what I've thought about is remain single."

Qiu's sisters: "Nonsense! All that schooling made you dumb. People like you are rare. Not normal."

In this conversation, Qiu's family kept conveying the values of "if you don't get married, you're worthless" and "if you don't get married, you won't be happy" to Qiu, which makes Qiu feel guilty and stressed.

Qiu's father: "Why are you doing this? You're the only one in our family to have gone to university and I've always been proud of you. We are not a rich family, but I still work day and night to pay for your tuition. You are too selfish."

Qiu: "So...if I don't get married, I am a loser, right? If I don't get married, I'm a sinner, right?"

Qiu's sister: "Yes, you are! If you don't get married, you won't be happy in your life!"

Theme 1 indicates that Qiu is under overwhelming pressure from her parents on the issue of marriage. In fact, not only Qiu in the documentary film, but almost all single women in China today face this kind of pressure from their parents, especially the only child. Qiu's family believes marriage is a tradition that has been practiced in China for thousands of years and the rules cannot be broken. This view reflects the Chinese traditional marital values of universal marriage, monogamy, and procreation within marriage [8]. This is also a reflection of Confucian thought, where family and marriage are highly valued for their reproductive function, and marriage is seen as an expression of filial piety to parents [9]. In general, the film represents that in the context of early and universal marriage in China, single women face great pressure from their parents because they are not married. Moreover, parental pressure stems from the expectations of parents for their children's marriage. As parents get older, they want their children to be accompanied by their spouses, so that they can be reassured.

3.3. Theme 2 - Gender Discrimination in the Marriage Market

This clip shows the conversation between Qiu and the dating counsellor. The dating counselor led the conversation to the idea that Qiu was at a disadvantage in the marriage market and kept hitting Qiu's self-confidence with derogatory words such as "you're really old", "you're not pretty", "please don't think you're in a good position".

Dating counselor: "What are your criteria for choosing a mate?"

Qiu: "I may have higher requirements for my future partner, first of all he should be as well educated as I am. The important thing is that I would like to have an equal relationship between us, for example, he can share household chores with me."

Dating counselor: "Sorry if I'm being too direct. First of all, in terms of appearance, you are not beautiful in the traditional sense. I don't mean you're not pretty, I mean you're not a beauty. Besides, you are old in the marriage market."

Qiu: "I'm old? I think I'm just the right age."

Dating counselor: "You may think you're young, but the truth is you're fooling yourself. At your age, you no longer have an advantage in the marriage market. Please don't put yourself in a high position."

Dating counselor: "It may seem that your personality is too tough because of your lawyer work, and you should be more softer."

In this scene, it reveals that Qiu is in a passive position in the marriage market. She is considered as old,

too educated, and too successful, thus less to be selected in the marriage market. Firstly, age hypergamy is a common concept of spouse selection in China, i. e. a man prefers to find a woman younger than him as mate [10]. As a result, as women get older, they are more likely at a disadvantage in the marriage market. Secondly, the gender stereotype of patriarchal ideology leads men to refuse to choose high-achieving women as partners [11]. In the film, Qiu expresses her expectation for an equal gender relationship. In fact, this is what all women in modern society expect from their partners, an egalitarian relationship. To summarize, theme 2 portrays the age-biased mate selection and patriarchal gender stereotype lead women to suffer from gender inequality in the marriage market, thus revealing the resurgence of gender inequality in China [11]. In spite of this, women still hold expectations for an equal gender relationship. As a result, single women have been fighting against gender inequalities imposed by the traditional patriarchal ideology and the desire for an egalitarian gender relationship in modern times.

3.4. Theme 3 - Feminine Consciousness Awakening

This clip shows a conversation between Qiu and her therapist during a therapy session. Qiu described appropriately the discrimination she suffered from patriarchal ideology and traditional Chinese marriage values, like the tradition of foot-binding for women in ancient China. Then she compared her life to escape.

Qiu: "If you do not get married, you are leftover women. Anyone can condemn you. There are too many of these annoying sounds around me, and I want to escape from them. Just to live my life. But... It's too hard. I think that... It was like in ancient times in China when women wrapped their little feet, and now it seemed like I was forced to squeeze my feet into those little shoes. But I have big feet and I don't want my feet to be squeezed in, it hurts."

Therapist: "When you feel these overwhelming pressures, do you have any plans to escape them?"

Qiu: "I plan to go to France to pursue my master's degree. I don't think it's an escape, I choose another way to enrich my life and live my own life. I believe it's a way to struggle with these pressures. I think I can fight my way out of the stigmatization of the term "leftover woman". I think to some extent I conquered this discrimination against single women. However, sometimes I feel like I am alone in the battle. When I defeat one enemy, behind me I find a thousand more waiting to fight. The best way is to fight and run away at the same time. I was living a life of running away all the time. I could live a wonderful life, all this is just because I'm not getting married."

At the end of the film, Qiu resigned from her job, and decided to pursue her studies in France. In the last scene, Qiu was riding a bicycle freely around the campus.

This clip represents how Qiu resisted the oppression imposed by the leftover women label. Instead of compromising to these pressures, the film presents Qiu choosing her ideal life to achieve her goals, which is her awakening of female consciousness. She challenged traditional marriage values, rejected traditional gender stereotype, and fought against the gender discrimination that stemmed from traditional patriarchal ideology.

4. DISCUSSION

Popular culture reflects class, gender and race. It is a place where individuals resist and reconcile power relations, and where hegemony is contested and resisted [6] [12]. As a form of popular culture, film is a reproduction of social reality, which conveys a specific ideology to the audience through images, words, emotions, gestures, etc., hence film is both entertaining and educative [13].

4.1. How the Social Reality is Reproduced

In the documentary film *Leftover Women*, first of all, it depicts that Qiu is under pressure from her parents and suffers from gender discrimination in the marriage market, conveying to the public the pressure and prejudice that single women undergo as being labeled "leftover women". The film highlights the pressure exerted on women by traditional marriage concepts, the constraints imposed by gender stereotype on single women with successful careers, ultimately shedding light on the resurgence of gender inequality in China [10].

4.2. How to Facilitate Feminine Consciousness Awakening

Secondly, film not only serves as a space for ideological translation, but also a bridge that connects private and public discourses [12]. It brings specific ideologies, values, and knowledge into the public discourse, thereby provoking discussion and raising public attention. The documentary film portrays to the public how Qiu's feminine consciousness awakens through her rejection of leftover women's identity, which is the ideology of feminine consciousness conveyed by the film. This is exactly the educational significance of the documentary film, raising public attention for gender equality.

4.3. How to Foster Learning

In popular culture, when hegemonic ideologies exist and are challenged and resisted, it can stimulate the

public to conduct autonomous learning [6]. In this case, the public connects conflict issues in popular culture with real life, subsequently acquire a sense of identity, thus learning could happen. The documentary film *Leftover Women* brings social issues into cultural works, reveals the social reality that leftover women suffer from gender inequality, and highlights the awakening of single women's self-awareness and rebellious consciousness. In this way, this controversial topic is brought to the public, thus guiding the public to a correct understanding of the leftover women phenomenon and calling on female to fight against gender inequality.

5. CONCLUSION

This article explores the educational significance of popular culture as public pedagogy, through the documentary film *Leftover Women*, it reveals that popular culture has a proactive role in facilitating the feminine consciousness awakening and the public's learning. First, this article explains that public pedagogy is an interdisciplinary, multiple form of teaching and learning that beyond the formal schooling system. It has educational implications for lifelong learning. Second, popular culture, as a key instrument of public pedagogy, which provides space where hegemony is reproduced and challenged. Third, through a discourse analysis of the documentary film *Leftover Women*, it reveals that the label of leftover women is a gender discrimination against single women, as well as a resurgence of gender inequality in China. Finally, the article concludes the educational significance of the documentary film. The documentary presents the social issue of gender inequality to the public and help them be aware of the constraints that gender inequality imposed on women. More importantly, it empowers every woman fight against gender inequality. In conclusion, popular culture as public pedagogy provides both entertainment and educative value. The limitation of this article is that it does not examine the effect of transformative learning, it only considers the educational significance from the perspective of popular culture. Future studies can examine whether popular culture can practice its educational significance in people's daily life from the perspective of the audience.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Xu Yadi conducted literature reviews and wrote this article.

REFERENCES

- [1] J.A. Sandlin, B.D. Schultz, J. Burdick, Handbook of public pedagogy: Education and learning beyond schooling, Routledge, 2010.

- [2] T. Gutierrez-Schmich, J. Heffernan, Public Pedagogy, in: N. Rodriguez, W. Martino, J. Ingrey, E. Brockenbrough, (Eds.), *Critical Concepts in Queer Studies and Education*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2016, pp. 239-248. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-55425-3_24
- [3] J.A. Sandlin, M. P. O'Malley, J. Burdick, Mapping the Complexity of Public Pedagogy Scholarship: 1894–2010, *Review of Educational Research* 81(3) (2011) 338-375. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654311413395>
- [4] J.F. Brady, Critical feminist ethics in the multicultural debate, *Cultural Circles* 2 (1998) 107-116.
- [5] H. A. Giroux, Breaking into the Movies: Pedagogy and the Politics of Film, *JAC* 21(3) (2001) 583–598. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20866426>
- [6] J.A. Sandlin, R. R. Wright, C. Clark, Reexamining Theories of Adult Learning and Adult Development Through the Lenses of Public Pedagogy, *Adult Education Quarterly* 63 (1) (2013) 3-23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713611415836>
- [7] P. Armstrong, J. Coles, Repackaging the Past: Commodification, Consumerism and the Study of History, *Convergence* 41(1) (2008) 63-76.
- [8] A.M. Gaetano, China's 'leftover women': Myths and realities, in: Z. Xiaowei and Z. Lucy Xia (Eds.), *Handbook on the Family and Marriage in China*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017, pp. 125-141. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781785368196>
- [9] T. Gui, "Leftover women" or single by choice: gender role negotiation of single professional women in contemporary China, *Journal of Family Issues* 44(11) (2020) 1956-1978. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X20943919>
- [10] J. You, X. Yi, M. Chen (2016), Love, life, and "leftover ladies" in urban China, <https://mpa.ub.uni-muenchen.de/id/eprint/70494>
- [11] L.H. Fincher, *Leftover women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*, Zed Books, 2014.
- [12] J. Hartley, *Communication, Cultural and Media Studies: The Key Concepts*, Routledge, London, 2002.
- [13] H. A. Giroux, Breaking into the Movies: Pedagogy and the Politics of Film, *JAC* 21(3) (2001) 583–598. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20866426>