

Examining Women Characterization in ‘Main-Melody Movies’ Through Female Perspectives – A Case Study of Island Keeper

Qiyan Tong

The Central Academy of Drama

**Corresponding author. Email: 578849961@qq.com*

ABSTRACT

Films in the genre called ‘main-melody movies’ have come out thick and fast to commemorate the 100-year anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. *Island Keeper*, directed by Chen Li, has largely beat competition and won the recognition and acclaims of the general public. It’s a story about the lofty aspirations of obscure characters – how the couple Mr. Wang Jicai and Mrs. Wang Shihua brave ordeals to remain on watch on an island. A narrative based on documentary approach, the movie focuses on the personal world and colors of Mr. Wang Jicai, yet Director Chen Li’s characterization of Mrs. Wang Shihua also deserves our analysis and interpretation[1]. This paper attempts to examine female characters in ‘main-melody movies’ through a feminine prism.

Keywords: *Main-melody, Movie; Female characterization.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In conjunction with the progress and development of the time, ‘main-melody movies’ are featuring ever more female characters and female modes of thinking[2]. Film directors are gaining more unique insights into the characterization of female characters, which are thus becoming fuller and more rounded.

Nowadays, ‘main-melody movies’ often feature women figures. In one of such movies, *1921*, the director devotes significant efforts to the characterization of Wang Huiwu, a female intellectual, thereby providing multiple layers and angles to the film. For similar reasons, ‘main-melody movies’ often do not scrimp on the characterization and description of female figures. Even so, as many films and TV series are directed by male directors, their characterization of women figures tends to be more ‘masculine’ and independent’ and lack the exquisite and sentimental sides of women. I think that women, as participants and builders of social significance, have increasingly become the focus of the film in the shaping and presentation of female images in the film. The proportion of female images in the main theme film of the new century is gradually increasing, and there are new changes and directions in the image shaping techniques. In terms of plot shaping, they oppose

the materialized plot setting of female images, Presenting female images with anti materialized plots; In the aspect of appearance shaping, they are no longer willing to be the object of male gaze and show female images in non gaze appearance; In terms of spiritual shaping, go deep into the spiritual world to explore individual consciousness, and complete the shaping of female image in the expression of female individual consciousness. In Chen Li’s *Island Keeper*, Wang Shihua demonstrates the unique modes of thinking of women and better fits with the era and situations that women are in. Chen Li focuses on people’s spiritual world, takes things with people, finds poetry in things, and combines realistic spirit with romantic feelings[3].

2. PLOT SYNOPSIS

The movie tells the story of two island keepers, Wang Jicai and his wife Wang Shihua, who work for 32 years on a remote island of China and devote the best years of their life to safeguarding it. Over the years, they have to contend with various adversities, including appalling conditions, but they stay loyal to their posts and work assiduously with the island’s residents to overcome a variety of challenges. In commonness their greatness shines out, for they make due contributions to the Motherland and offer something valuable and meaningful to the society.

3. CHARACTERIZATION THROUGH DETAILS

The general public tend to judge a person's personality by sizing up his or her facial features and clothing. In *Island Keeper*, the character Wang Shihua originates from a real-life person, therefore Director Chen Li endeavors to match the character with the archetype in terms of styling, and the actor Gong Zhe tries to replicate the real-life Wang Shihua in both disposition and mien. The choice of costumes should not only be suited to a such a simple woman but also fitting for artistic creation. Chen Li does a great balancing job staying true to the characteristics of Wang Shihua while facilitating the development of the movie. Besides using costumes and makeup to replicate the character – the fundamental competence of a director – Chen Li brings Wang Shihua alive through such details as delicate facial expression and petty gestures. For example, the director chooses not to explicitly depict Wang Shihua's emotions towards her husband, but rather present it indirectly. When Wang Shihua gets to know that Wang Ji Cai wants to stay in his post on the island, she doesn't say much but just resigns from her job at school and move with Wang Jicai to the island. Despite the tough living conditions, Wang Shihua never complains and always stays on the side of Wang Jicai. In those seemingly endless years, she never shows worry or concern and always keeps her smile in front of Wang Jicai. From these details, we can see that unlike male directors who tend to depict women's fluctuating emotions, Chen Li prefers a 'quiet way' and limited acting skill for the characterization of such a role, thus enabling the audience to gradually appreciate her unique charm and spirit.

Through the precise selection of life details, the film focuses on the formation track of Wang Shihua's simple, true and noble thought with artistic lens, and explores Wang Shihua's spiritual world and human nature. From the perspective of the purpose of aesthetic creation, the film emphasizes both form and spirit, and the artistic conception is far-reaching. Wang Shihua, played by Gong Zhe, plays a township intellectual woman who came from a primary school teacher from form to spirit. From passively going to the island to actively guarding the island, the sublimation of this soul track is presented naturally and thoroughly by art[4].

To some extent, the essence of the story is irrational. It does not express ideas through boring rational speculation. No matter how sober rational analysis is, it is not enough to nourish people's soul. Of all the feelings, love and family affection can most resonate. When it comes to love, one of the scenes that impressed me most was that Wang Shihua and Wang Jicai met on the island after they had been separated for a long time. In the wind and snow, Wang Jicai picked up Wang Shihua and circled in the air. The director uses a few seconds of slow motion to present, as if to say the common wish in the hearts of

the two people and the audience: let the beautiful moment of reunion last longer and longer. Then it came to an abrupt end. This is an advanced processing method, clean and tidy, emotional point to point, no rendering, no procrastination, real and powerful[8].

4. ANALYSIS ON THE ISLAND KEEPER PETTY THINGS

Many 'main-melody movies' resort to a line at the end or a splendid scene to elevate the theme. In a break with such a routine method, *Island Keeper* focuses on the authenticity of the stories to the extent that people as audience forget the existence of the camera. In this situation, using too many creative rendering and foil techniques results in a sensation of gilding the lily rather than the sublimation of the subject effect. Well-versed in documenting, Chen Li refrains from letting her imaginations go wild; instead, she endeavors to replicate the truest inner voice of women figures in their characterization. Wang Shihua's image is not blown out of proportion through the use of grand proclamations; she's presented as a down-to-earth person who is sometimes driven by her petty feelings. For instance, she is unhappy that her husband lies to her in order to stay on the island; she showers her complaints on Wang Changjie; and she keeps wishing for her husband's transfer to a new job away from the island. These simple camera languages are not intended for the characterization of grand figures with lofty aspirations and beliefs; rather, the depiction of trivial affairs enables us to see a lovely and authentic Wang Shihua who sometimes complains about the decisions of higher officials simply because of her love for her husband. It's clear that Chen Li is bent on presenting the everyday stuff related to Wang Shihua and her husband, which turns out to be powerful enough for us to see the greatness of Wang Shihua. Such is the unique exquisiteness and perspective of a woman director.

Another scene in the movie shows Wang Shihua giving birth to a baby despite the poor medical conditions on the island. Here again, Chen Li indirectly adds one more dimension to the characterization of Wang Shihua as a great mother.

Based on the analysis, people can see that women directors can add subtlety to characterization, and 'main-melody movies' can tell stories through the daily events of ordinary people. Hence, the audience would feel their similarities with the characters, which in turn helps them to see the credibility and greatness of the female character.

It is worth mentioning that the acting skills of the actors are also very good. The Wang Shihua played by Gong Zhe is full of resentment and helplessness. The audience can also see her love for her husband and guilt for her family. Especially when her child Zhiguo was

born, the audience knew that the result would be fine, but they still held their hearts for her until they burst into tears in the dark night. The recurring Haiyan and Huaihai opera back to her mother's house imply the conflict between realistic courage and expectation, which is well explained by Gong Zhe[8].

5. WOMEN INSEPARABLE FROM FAMILY

The characterization of women tends to depict their inseparable relationship with their families and the plots would center around families. Chen Li's *Island Keeper* is no exception. But unlike male directors who like to pull women characters away from their families in one way or another to highlight their aspirations and independence, Chen Li never attempts to separate Wang Shihua from her family. Perhaps for Chen Li and many other women directors, female characters should never be taken away from family settings, no matter what genre the movie is. In *Island Keeper*, Chen Li puts Wang Shihua in tight connection with her family all throughout. Wang Shihua says: "As long as you stay on the island, I'll stay on your side." This line is in fact Wang Shihua's conviction and explains her inseparability from her family destiny[5].

Nowadays, the whole society advocate women's freedom and independence, which reflects the thinking of women in a new era. Yet this has nothing to do with Wang Shihua. She is a traditional woman who highly values family connections – a thinking that's very natural to women of her era and could be partly attributed to social circumstances. Her thoughts about and attachment to family is what make the movie outstanding and touching. For such reasons, Chen Li never tries to separate her characterization from her family connections. For example, when Wang Shihua makes up her mind to join her husband on Kaishan Island, she has to persuade her parents to agree to her decision. By that time, she's been pregnant for six months, but she never gives up on her journey to reunite with Wang Jicai, which shows her profound feelings towards her husband and her filial piety towards her parents. In another scene, when she knows of grandma's intention to ask Xiao Bo to drop out of school so that her little brother can resume his studies, Wang Shihua insists that Xiao Bo continue his education. This demonstrates her sense of responsibility as a mother and her love for her child. In Chen Li's work, the female character in this 'main-melody movie' is not someone on a pedestal but a real and ordinary woman who inspires our respect.

Through a range of scenes, Chen Li depicts the inseparable relationship between a woman and her family, bringing to the audience an approachable and kind female character.

6. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GUARDING THE ISLAND

Under extreme pain and loneliness, people are the easiest to think about the meaning of life, and this problem often leads people to endless nothingness, an indomitable despair. In *Cast Away* Tom Hanks used volleyball as a human dialogue to relieve his loneliness, relying on an unopened email and a photo of his girlfriend to support his idea of survival. In *Island Keeper*, I think Wang Jicai often says, "If you can do a good job in your life, you won't lose heart or live in vain." It is an additional value anchored under the mainstream value of your own national feelings." The sense of responsibility of defending the island is guarding the country, and guarding the country is guarding the family continues to sublimate in the eyes of trust, and the simple feeling of patriotism has been repeatedly purified in the flag-raising ceremony of two people. I like Wang Shihua's words very much: "You guard the island, I protect you." Western film and television literature about isolated islands are also excellent, and Eastern and Western cultures have their own characteristics. *Island Keeper* deeply reveals the spiritual core and cultural heritage of the sons and daughters of China. Regarding commitment, responsibility and belief, it contributes to the Chinese story and expression in the island-themed film and television works. It is not too much to say that it is a Chinese spiritual epic. More importantly, the role of the island keeper is a civilian hero. It presents a plain but great life course, which is enough to distinguish it from most of the main melody films that have appeared in the current market. This particularity of the film widens the selection range of the theme film creation in terms of types and themes to a certain extent.

7. CONCLUSION

Island Keeper is a masterpiece of 'main-melody movies' through its use of camera languages and storytelling. Director Chen Li demonstrates her unique competence in the characterization of female characters in such movies[6]. Rather than talking loftily about people and their spirit and beliefs, Chen Li zooms in on petty things, daily dialogues, delicate language and subtle movement so that we are able to look the character in the eye and discover her uncommonness bit by bit. This constitutes the exquisiteness and uniqueness of female directors. Many 'main-melody movies' put female characters in grand historic narratives and drive them to grow to the same level of importance as male characters. However, in *Island Keeper*, we are face to face with an ordinary yet great Wang Shihua, a female character that we can learn from and we would love to praise. For such reasons, it's advisable that when directors work on 'main-melody movies' and female characterization, they should carefully weigh the degree of

characterization to ensure both the artistic and realistic values of the characters[7].

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Firstly, I would like to show my deepest gratitude to my teachers and professors in my university, who have provided me with valuable guidance in every stage of the writing of this thesis. Further, I would like to thank all my friends and parents for their encouragement and support. Without all their enlightening instruction and impressive kindness, I could not have completed my thesis.

REFERENCES

- [1] Li Weiguan, Sun Ling, Li Miao (2014). Interpretation of Film Masterpieces. Tsinghua University Press
- [2] Kong Bo (2020) . The female image of the theme film "The Past of Huanghuatang". Journal of Film Literature 21.
- [3] Zhang hua (2006). Ethnic Minority women in the Modern perspective: Watching the films "Turpan Love Song" and "Beautiful Homeland". Film Review journal 17
- [4] Zhong Chengxiang (2021). People in this life can do a good thing without loss of conscience. PLA Daily.
- [5] Yao, ruyong (2020). Red memory and female glamour. Journal of Film Literature 1
- [6] She ting (2015). The Combination of beauty and intelligence. Commodity and Quality Journal 15
- [7] Zhang Yu (2016). Analysis of "Monster Hunt" from the perspective of feminism. Youth Journal no.4