

# The Characteristics of Female Images in Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean Films and Television Works after 1990

Muyun Li<sup>1, a, \*, †</sup> Zhongxuan Sun<sup>2, b, \*, †</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Letters and Science, University of California, Santa Barbara, the United States 93106, the United States

<sup>2</sup>School of Media Science (School of Journalism), Northeast Normal University, China 130117, China

\*Corresponding author. Email: <sup>a</sup> [muyun@umail.ucsb.edu](mailto:muyun@umail.ucsb.edu); <sup>b</sup> [1317585629@qq.com](mailto:1317585629@qq.com)

†These authors contributed equally.

## ABSTRACT

With the development of society and the spread of feminism, the female images of various countries have changed. Specifically, along with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was promulgated and became formally effective, the female images in the films and television works after this convention started to manifest changes. This article systematically displays the results of the localization of the transformation of female images in East Asia (especially China, Japan and South Korea) after 1990 and provides convenience for the field of feminist image research on these three countries. This paper searched on the CNKI, Google Scholar, HowNet, SCI, KCI, Wanfang, and Douding and selected 21 articles related to the topic, which are summarized and analysed according to different characteristics and countries. Taking the films and television works of China, Japan, and South Korea as an example, this paper discusses the evolution of female images in film and television works. In conclusion, through the depictions of female images in the film and television industry in three different Asian countries, this article reveals that Chinese women characters have the characteristics of being independent and fashionable, Korean women figures have the traits of being persecuted, traditional, and gaining more freedom, and Japanese women own the specialties of pursuing a higher quality marriage partner, awakening of self-awareness and being more financially independent, promoting women's discourse power, and awakening of feminine rebellious consciousness.

**Keywords:** Asian female images, Film and television works, China, Japan, South Korea

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the process of feminism localization, native women's studies have the nature of "women's liberation" [1]. And according to the different countries' background, the result of feminism localization will be different. So when the feminism is employed in local film and television, what it presents about female ideology will be various.

After the 1960s, East Asian countries and European and American countries also entered a period of long-term peaceful economic development. Japan in the 1970s, South Korea in the 1980s and China in the 1990s have witnessed the miracle of rapid economic development [2]. On December 18, 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against

women. On September 3, 1981, the Convention entered into force. Over the past 30 years, the Convention on the elimination of discrimination against women has played an important role in the international and domestic society [3]. Therefore, this article chooses 1990 as the starting point for the transformation of female images in film and television series. So far, the economic background and feminist communication of the three countries have been improved to varying degrees. So because of the progress in movie industry and people's living standard and the emergence of feminism, the female images are changed in films and TV series [4]. Summarization of those characteristics help manifest features that are missing out in the women characters in films and television works in these countries, and directly reflects what women figures should be from the perspective of directors. Classifications of different characteristics are indications of possible prominent traits

of contemporary women in the society. To some extent, this paper provides with insights about what the general women figure in different time periods in different countries. Future film producers and scholars can understand the public’s aesthetic orientation through film and television plays and their broadcasting, and know what kind of female image is expected by the audience in the market. And this research would help to lay a certain

research foundation for the future study of women’s image.

Taking “female images in film and television plays” and “women’s rights” as the keywords, this study searched the articles from 1990 to now on Google Scholar, HowNet, SCI, KCI, Wanfang and Douding. Through screening, 21 articles (see table 1) were included in the classified summary of this study.

**Table1:** Analysis of 21 papers containing the phrase “Feminism and Female Images in Film and Television Works”

No. of papers	Context of “Feminism and Female Images in Film and Television Works”	Reference
3	Feminist cultural background of the Three Kingdoms	[1] [2] [3] [7]
2	Female images in Chinese film and television works	[5] [6]
7	Female images in Korean film and television works	[4] [8] [9] [10] [11] [12] [13]
8	Female images in Japanese film and television works	[14] [15] [16] [17] [18] [19] [20] [21]

**2. FEMALE IMAGES’ TRANSFORMATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS**

**2.1. Characteristics in Chinese Films and Television Works**

Following China’s economic Reform and Opening-Up policy, it has witnessed a high-speed economic development. In the meantime, the Convention on the elimination of discrimination against women (CEDAW) is accepted by Chinese government. In China, since the Han Dynasty established the exclusive respect for Confucianism, Chinese women have been deprived of independent personality and basic rights. Independent personality refers to people’s independence and autonomy [2]. From the late 1990s to the 21st century, female images of different types and styles appeared in film and television works. At this stage, female consciousness has gradually developed, and the shaping of image has also developed from flat to diversified and multi-level [5]. So the female images have been changed in the films and TV plays.

**2.1.1 Independent women**

With the development of China, women no longer follow the traditional image - Three Obediences and Four Virtues (in ancient China, a woman was required to obey her father before marriage, obey her husband during her married life and obey her sons in widowhood; four virtues refer to fidelity, physical charm, propriety in

speech and efficiency in needle work). Instead, they went to work and satisfied their life expectations through their own labor [5]. In 2001, *Meteor Garden* was premiered in Taiwan and introduced into the mainland, causing a sensation. *Autumn in My Heart*, *The Love Story of “Korea’s Life and Death”*, *Winter Love Song*, and *Kiss and Love* have been popular in the three Asian countries since 2002. Domestic TV plays are full of the plot of the plutocrats falling in love with Cinderella and leading women across classes. We can call this plot “fantasy”. In this kind of plot, it seems that women can attract men’s attention and get the “Redemption” of excellent men without any effort, so as to achieve class leap [6]. However, film and television works can be widely spread among the public only if they reasonably shape the gender image [5]. Therefore, after a certain age, especially after getting married and having children, the female audience will gradually realize that this exaggerated expression is unrealistic and begin to pay attention to the independent female model in real life [6]. In the TV series *Peking Man in New York*, the character A Chun is independent and has excellent talent and wisdom. In the play, she appeared in front of people as a female elite, telling the public that women can be economically independent and develop their own career without relying on men, which promoted the development of female consciousness [5]. Engels once said that “women’s own awakening” is the subjective condition of women’s liberation. Only by changing themselves can they have their own days [5].

### 2.1.2. Fashionable women

In old China, unmarried women did not often have the opportunity to go out, so women's posture could not be seen by the public. However, modern film and television plays often show women's posture. Many films and television plays depict women's faces, figures and shapes [5]. In traditional TV series, women's beauty is often associated with negative implications, but in modern plays, fashionable clothes and sweet-looking faces are a praise to women [6]. The dress of female characters in modern film and television plays has become viewers' fashion vane. There are some representative female characters in different film and television plays [5]. The play *Pink Girl* has a successful portrayal of Wan Ling, who was cast by Chen Hao, has the title of "ten thousand fans". She is beautiful and generous, with heavy makeup and red lips, enchanting posture, surrounded by countless suitors, and is a character with the style of stars and the moon [5]. And the role played by Ni Ni in *The Golden Years* broadcast this year is a beautiful woman with Oriental charm. She not only has fashionable clothes, but also has a lively and outgoing personality.

## 2.2. Characteristics in Korean Films and Television Works

Korean women had a fairly independent personality and basic rights before the 17th century. But in the Li Dynasty, not only the Confucian system and bureaucratic system were introduced, but also the thought of Confucianism was used to educate the people. After Japan's surrender in 1945, the Korean Peninsula was bounded by the 38th parallel of north latitude and taken over by the Soviet Union and the United States respectively. With the respective support of the United States and the Soviet Union, the Republic of Korea (also known as South Korea or North Korea) was established in the south of the Korean Peninsula in August 1948, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (also known as South Korea or North Korea) was established in the north of the Korean Peninsula in September 1948 [7]. Due to different historical backgrounds, the performances of South Korea and China are quite different. According to the transformation of female images in Korean films and TV plays, the characteristics of female images are illustrated in the following three parts.

### 2.2.1. Persecuted women

In recent years, Korean films and TV plays have actually become two important ways to reveal women's images. And in some international film festivals or competitions, Korean realistic films also stand out [12]. Taking *Suyuan*, *Bedevilled*, and *Lady Vengeance* as examples, realistic films mainly tell the stories of persecuted women [11]. As an important type in Korean

films, women who are "oppressed and insulted" play an important part in those movies. In this type of film, "the weak" is the feature of most films at the beginning [12]. And because the film addresses a realistic theme, it directly and nakedly reveals the plight of women in Korean society to the public. "Innocent girls", "scapegoats for male teachers" and "labor in the family" are what these women show themselves in those films. At the same time, they also reflect the underground status of women and even become victims of men [13]. However, in this type of film, there will also be a beautiful outlook on the ending of women, so as to cater to the public's aesthetics, such as the arrest of bad guys and the success of revenge.

### 2.2.2. Traditional women

Due to the influence of Confucianism, the female images in Korean TV plays around 2000 actually prefer the state of traditional women, gentle, virtuous and quiet as male accessories [2]. And as mentioned above, the female image at this time is closer to the image waiting for the arrival of "miracle". Class crossing is the main conflict point of the plot. Women's status is low, and the characteristics of "accessories" have not been changed. They often show tenderness and consideration, diligence and simplicity in the film. However, because the spread of feminism was not deeply rooted in the hearts of the people at that time, and could meet the imagination and resonance of poor girls, the female images in such films were deeply sought after by the public at that time [9]. Even the neighboring countries of South Korea, such as China, are competing to follow this model.

### 2.2.3. Women with more freedom

In Korean films after 2010, women's images have undergone great changes. Taking *Please Answer 1997*, *Please Answer 1994* and other *Please Answer* series as examples, women's images are no longer traditional, they gain more freedom and their characters are richer. The plot no longer only focuses on love, but focuses on the life of normal people [9]. In *Please Answer 1988*, the two heroines are presented to the audience with brand-new Korean female images. The contrast of their personalities also makes their destinies very different, which creates the text symbol opposition of female images in Korean plays and breaks the audience's inherent impression of Korean heroines in the past [9]. At the same time, in the past five years, a large number of female images have emerged as heirs of chaebols, which is related to the increase in the proportion of Korean women's economic participation [8]. In the new TV plays in 2021, women as professional women also account for the majority. Men and women are equal, and the life of female characters is more independent.

## **2.3. Characteristics in Japanese Films and Television Works**

### **2.3.1. Pursuing a higher quality marriage partner**

Two articles mention this alteration of the female image in Japanese TV series. In the article written by Shuruan Wang, through analysis of the behaviors of the women protagonists in this TV series, women's attitudes toward love and marriage are no longer limited to finding someone who can merely support a family but someone with good personality of being warm-hearted and considerate as well. The manifestation of such alteration in the TV series is the woman protagonist's entire loss of satisfaction with her indifferent and unconcerned husband and she started an extramarital relationship with a biology teacher who could arouse her passion and excitement of love in her heart unlike her husband [14]. The other article written by Bihong Lin discusses the changes in value on love and marriage of office ladies in Japan through the TV series *Tokyo Love Story*, *The Strength of Love*, *Konkatsu!*, and *Love Generation*. In its analysis of *Tokyo Love Story*, the article concludes that because of the change in the economics of the society, the women protagonists (who are mostly office ladies) in this TV play raise higher standards or requirements to their future "the other half". They contend that their husbands are expected to be physically tall, be highly educated, and have a high income, and their marriage is expected to be comfortable, communicative, and cooperative [15].

### **2.3.2 Awakening of self-awareness and being more financially independent**

Three articles mention this alteration of the female image in Japanese TV series. The article written by Tingting Wang analyzes the TV play *Wonderful Single Life* and derives the reasons for a social reality that the increase in the number of women not getting married, among one of which is the rise of women's self-awareness. As more Japanese women are highly educated and start to have careers, they are no longer forced to depend on men and marriage to live and support themselves but could depend on themselves instead [16]. Marriage and bearing children are no longer their yokes or duties but free choices. Another article written by Nannan Gao explores a female image of women who concentrate on their careers and stay away from family. This image is derived from women characters in the TV series *Wonderful Single Life* and *The Reason I Can't Find My Love*, in which both women protagonists firmly take their career opportunities in priority in comparison to love after experiencing the torture of love [17]. The third article was written by Qian Pan and mainly focuses on the TV series *Mother and Woman*. This article addresses the relationship between women and work, women and marriage, women and family, and women's self-redeem

and self-consciousness manifested by these two TV series. Specifically, this article suggests that the stepmother of the woman protagonist of *Mother* gets a sense of respect, satisfaction, and achievement through work, and it is her work that provides her with confidence and freedom in her daily life. Additionally, both women protagonists in these two TV series not only gained the ability to live independently with ease but also had stronger free will and independent personalities. They gained true freedom [18].

### **2.3.3 Promotion of women's discourse power**

There is one article written by Xiling Yuan that mentions this alteration of the female image in Japanese TV series. This article focuses on the analysis of the TV series *Wataru Seken wa Oni Bakari* and addresses the changes of women characters, female subjectivity and women's discourse power, and women within a harmonious society. In this article's discussion about the promotion of women's discourse power, through the analysis of the plot of *Wataru Seken wa Oni Bakari* that highlights the revelation of female discourse in the face of male chauvinism. Women in this TV series take their discourse power seriously and strive for it, as they realize that the contradictions with men need to be softened and resolved through discourse communication instead of merely solving the problems through changing behaviors. Additionally, the relationship between husband and wife, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in this TV series manifests a new form of coexistence and discourse mode [19], which indirectly emphasizes women's growing subjectivity in all sorts of occasions.

### **2.3.4 Awakening of feminine rebellious consciousness**

Two articles mention this alteration of the female image in Japanese TV series. The article was written by Xinfeng Wang mainly focuses on the analysis of four main female characters in the TV series *Murder at Mt. Fuji*, including their experience, personalities, and visions of love. Through its analysis, three of the characters express a sense of revolting through their behaviors in the TV series. One is the daughter of the victim's sister who firmly chooses to get divorced after discovering her husband's extramarital relationship and actively fights for getting married with her loved ones under the condemnation of her family. The second character is the daughter of the first female character, who gives up her originally well-attended but unfree life arranged by her uncle and bravely escapes and rather pursues her dream of being a dancer and performing on the stage, though the path she chooses is filled with all sorts of hardships and obstacles. Another one is the other daughter of the first female character, who always sticks to her principles in front of reluctant things and takes revenge on her father because of his abandonment in her

childhood [20]. The article written by Jie Li addresses the social phenomena of cradle snatcher in the TV play *Kyō wa Kaisha Yasumimasu*. In this TV series, the female protagonist indirectly showcases a rebellious consciousness through association with an undergraduate who is 9 years younger than her. She persists in keeping this relationship which was not supported by her parents and gaining unexpected joy and love experience from it [21].

### 3. CONCLUSION

This paper concentrates on reviewing and summarizing the apparent characteristics of female characters in the mainstream film and television drama series of China, South Korea, and Japan after 1990. The female protagonists in Chinese and Korean television works share the characteristic of being independent. In conclusion, the female protagonists in China display the traits of being independent and fashionable; the female protagonists in South Korea reveal the traits of being persecuted and being traditional. The female protagonists in Japanese television series manifest the characteristics of pursuing a higher quality marriage partner, awakening of self-awareness and being more financially independent, promoting women's discourse power, and awakening of feminine rebellious consciousness.

Since this paper summarizes the characteristics of women protagonists in popular films and television series in recent years, it will be a decent reference for feminist students researching on Asian females to view the similarities and differences among women figures in different Asian countries. For future studies, more works that focus on the comparison studies among different countries are needed for a deeper investigation upon different female images among countries throughout the world.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Han, Zhai. "The Mirror of National Imagination: Another Side of the Concept of 'Feminism' in Modern China." *Political and Legal Forum*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2020, pp. 110-119. doi:CNKI:SUN:ZFLT. 0.2020-04-010.
- [2] Lixing, Chen. "A Comparative Study of Chinese, Japanese and Korean Women's Social Roles and Social Participation in East Asia (Part I)." *Hubei Social Sciences*, no. 8, 2020, pp.52-59. doi:10.13660/j.cnki. 42-1112/c.015437.
- [3] Zhengze, Pan. "On the implementation and improvement of the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in China." *Journal of West Anhui University*, vol. 33, no. 6, 2017, pp. 27-31 doi:CNKI:SUN:WXXB. 0.2017-06-007.
- [4] Jung Sung, Hye. "A Study on Male Cross Sexual Fashion Style in Contemporary Movie Posters - Focusing on 1990~2006-2008", vol.8, no.2, pp. 125-143 (19 pages) UCI : G704-001970.2008.8.2.008
- [5] Yufeng, Cui. "On the Shaping of Female Images in Film and Television Works." *News Research Guide*, vol.12, no. 17, 2021, pp. 221-223. doi:CNKI:SUN:XWDK. 0.2021-17-078.
- [6] Han, Gao. "A Study on the Female Images of Domestic Film and Television Dramas in the 'She' Era." *Media Forum*, vol. 4, no.15, 2021, pp. 155-156 + 158. doi:CNKI:SUN:CMLT. 0.2021-15-076.
- [7] Zhihua, Shen. "A review of Korean War Research: new materials and new views." *Research on the history of the Communist Party of China*, no. 6, 1996, pp. 88-92
- [8] Yuan, Wang. "New Changes in Female Images in Modern Korean Love Dramas." *Popular Literature and Art*. no. 13, 2015, pp.171-172. doi:CNKI:SUN:DZLU. 0.2015-13-145.
- [9] Liang, Yuan. "On the Changes in the Construction of Female Images in Korean Dramas." *Northern Media Research*, no. 2, 2018, pp. 85-87. doi:10.19544/j.cnki. bmyj. 2018.0058.
- [10] Minheng, Jin. *The Evolution of Female Images in Korean Dramas -- Based on the Investigation of 56 Korean Dramas*. [D] Anhui: Anhui University, 2014 DOI:10.7666/d.Y2578228.
- [11] Jun, Meng and Guangyan Wang. "From earth mother to siren -- a type analysis of female images in Korean films since the new century." *Contemporary Film*, no. 8, 2014, pp.188-191 doi:CNKI:SUN:DDDY. 0.2014-08-056.
- [12] Yanni, Wu. *An Analysis of the "Transformation" of Female Images in Korean Revenge Films*. Postgraduate course thesis of Southwest Jiaotong University. <https://www.docin.com/p-1894956721.html>2017.04.15.
- [13] Guangying, Song. "Vengeful Flower: Kind Gold." *Contemporary Film*, no. 6, 2006, pp.151-154. doi:CNKI:SUN:DDDY. 0.2006-06-040.
- [14] Shuhuan, Wang. "Hirugao: Heijitsu gogo 3 ji no koibitotachi: Japanese Women's New Love and Marriage Orientation." *Movie Review*, no.19, 2016, pp.107-109. doi:10.16583/j.cnki.52-1014/j.2016.19.036.
- [15] Bihong, Lin. "Analyzing the Changes in Japanese Working Women's Views on Marriage and Love from Movies and TV series." *Chongqing Keji*

*Xueyuan Xuebao(social science edition)*, no.11, 2011, pp. 161-162+173.  
doi:10.19406/j.cnki.cqkjxybskb.2011.11.065.

- [16] Tingting, Wang. “A Study on the New Image of Japanese Women in Mass Media: Taking Japanese TV Play Wonderful Single Life as an example.” *Chi Zi(early to mid)*, no. 22, 2014, p.223. doi:CNKI:SUN:CZZX.0.2014-22-195.
- [17] Nannan, Gao. “Research on the New Female Images in Japanese TV Series in Recent Years.” *Journal of News Research*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2017, p.31. doi:CNKI:SUN:XWDK.0.2017-03-022.
- [18] Qian, Pan. “An Interpretation of Female Images in Japanese Dramas Mother and Woman’s analysis mainly focuses on the TV series Mother and Woman.” *Da Zhong Wen Yi*, no.13, 2017, pp.187-188. doi:CNKI:SUN:DZLU.0.2017-13-169.
- [19] Xiling, Yuan. “Women and a Harmonious Society: An Interpretation of the Female Image Groups in the Japanese TV Play Wataru Seken wa Oni Bakari.” *Journal of Northwest University (philosophy and social science edition)*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2010, pp. 172-174. doi:10.16152/j.cnki.xdxbsk.2010.01.004.
- [20] Xinfeng, Wang. “A Brief Analysis of the Awakening of Women’s Rebellious Consciousness in the Japanese Drama Murder at Mt. Fuji.” [J]. *Youth Literator*, no. 9, 2021, pp. 68-169.
- [21] Jie, Li. “Looking at the ‘Cradle Snatcher’ Phenomenon in Contemporary Japanese Society from the Japanese Drama Kyō wa Kaisha Yasumimasu.” [J]. *Journal of Shandong Women’s University*, no. 3, 2018, pp. 72-77.