

# Chinese Cinema's Reflection on a Pre-Revolutionary China and Its Role in the Post-Modern Chinese Feminist Movement

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## ABSTRACT

Chinese cinemas had undergone a series of development. Women's roles in films were long being discussed. Two representative movies: *Two Stage Sisters* and *Sophie's Revenge*, one from the socialist revolutionary era and one made during contemporary society, reflected feminist ideologies' effects on movies. These two movies presented the trend of female characters changing from being affiliated to men to being socially independent. Under the influence of socialist theories, movies in the 1960s conveyed the common belief of women need to rely on men to survive. On the other hand, because of the twentieth century's commercialization and capitalism, films included several exaggerated elements to entertain the audience and illustrated women as independent figures. The paper will go through the difference between movies from these two time periods and the relationship between ideologies from that time with the movie.

**Keywords:** *Post-Revolutionary, Feminism, Chick Flicks, Consumerism, Chinese movie.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Chinese cinemas had been through a long journey of development from the social revolutionary era to the contemporary era. China during the 1960s underwent a great many social and political revolutions. Movies from this period consist of novelty elements, and major feminist ideas are being presented. The progressive development of early feminism in Communist China, which will be referred to as the "New China", has been projected through the critical transition in movies from focusing on the rising consciousness of Chinese women in New China to a drastic decline in independence featuring popular commercial "chick flicks" in the millennium China. Traditionally in the western context, feminist movies closely correspond to the progression of the Western feminist movement, portraying women's social surroundings and social roles and inevitably indicating the target audience who "sees" the women on stage. The existence of this audience is the scope in which we can tell a better story of how women in a specific époque live and think. It is worth noting that it is often through the perspective of the male audience we can imagine the women's circumstances in a patriarchal society.

To examine how women's roles in Chinese cinema change from focusing on the socialist revolutionary concept to contemporary commercial Chick Flicks in the period of 1960s to 2000s, it is essential to have a close look at how the Chinese feminist movement progresses and changes throughout half a century and have a clear definition of the concept of feminism in the modern Chinese context. After the reform and in the post-revolutionary China, the term "feminism" refers to the Chinese women's liberation movement in contrast to the traditional women's roles in pre-revolutionary China, which the Communist Party considers a heavy "bourgeoisie" mentality and directly contradict the socialist movement. This concept is also brought up in Clara Zetkin's constructs of femininity where she closely examined how mentality, especially how the "bourgeoisie" mentality and the Darwinist Socialist mentality, claiming that natural selection applies to society and promotes its growth, affect women's roles throughout German history [1] [2]. There is a huge contrast in female social status before the Chinese National Independence war and after the foundation of Communist China, which also highlights the power struggle between the middle-class bourgeoisie and the proletariat in post-war China. These power struggles brought the women's liberation movement under the

spotlight, featuring a drastic contrast from the traditional Chinese women being men's objects in a feudal society to a leftist view of women being "half of the sky". According to Kang Keqing, Chinese women were gaining equality under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, however, "the CCP, except perhaps in the 1920s, had never committed itself to achieve gender equality in China" [3]. The general social context of the Chinese feminist movement thus influenced the Chinese cinema which reflected this drastic change by strongly rejecting the previous connotation of women being subordinate and male-centered with erotic scenarios aiming to please the male audience for their pleasure.

## 2. THE MOVIE TWO STAGE SISTERS

In the following sections, a detailed case study will be employed to make more explanations of how Chinese movies reflected the feminist ideologies from that time and women's attempt to revolt and became independent. One of the representative movies from 1960s China named *Two Stage Sisters* tells the story of two actresses experiencing a series of difficulties during their careers [4]. *Two Stage Sisters* is essentially a social film reflecting the essence of humanity through the dynamics among two women and their interaction with men who dictated their lives; when one analyzes the film from a modern woman's perspective, one may not comprehend fully the motives behind certain actions of these two women. Yet, a closer interpretation of the Chinese feminist movement in the specific context will help us understand the long way these two women came in their journey of achieving self-actualization, independence, and self-fulfillment. We, as the audience, perceive the world from two women's points of view. This film is a thorough interpretation of Chinese feminism in the analysis of the essence of human nature in a feudal and patriarchal society, focusing on the analysis of how the destinies of two actresses and situations differ because of different mentalities. One of the most important motifs that constantly runs through in the movie is Chunhua's line stating her determination to dedicate herself to her performing career and to be a woman of strong integrity and morality. The lives of the two female protagonists mirror their different self-identities as women in a patriarchal China, showing that in a society where they were considered as the inferior race, they, whose voices might not be heard, have a chance to live a life of dignity if they choose to be conscious of the power behind their gender.

In the movie, *Two Stage Sisters* Yuehong and Chunhua are both actresses in the Yue opera and are very close friends. However, a competent and wealthy man, Mr. Tang, wants to possess Yuehong but is stopped by Chunhua and the opera teacher. The teacher dies beaten by the police trying to save Yuehong. Since they lose the support from their teacher, they are sold to the leader

Axin, yet Axin takes them to Shanghai to find Mr. Tang. There is an opportunity that the top actress in Shanghai is sick, and Mr. Tang asks Yuehong and Chunhua to replace her position in the show. This decision is successful, and the two girls soon become popular in Shanghai, and earn a lot of money. Things change when Mr. Tang starts to seduce them to play indecent shows. Chunhua rejects Mr. Tang's request, but Yuehong, who obsesses with the luxury and dissipation, falls into Mr. Tang's snare and marries him. Mr. Tang becomes more forcible after marriage, and Yuehong is constantly suffering. Luckily, Chunhua doesn't want to let her best friend falls and sets up a new opera team, revealing Mr. Tang's rascality. The movie expresses the underlying rebellious mind of these two women.

During the pre-revolutionary China where masculinity is the dominant stream and Chinese women, regardless of their social status, often face obstacles when they wish to achieve a career outside any area which they mainstream perceived as unconventional and are associated with negative connotations. A woman is lack individual identity other than being a wife, mother, and daughter. At the beginning of the movie, Chunhua's life is not controlled in her own hands, as she was a child bride who suffered from human trafficking and was sold to a family in a rural area as a product. Luckily, she eventually escaped. Many women from poor countryside China are subject to men's domination in feudal China. Chunhua escaped from a child bride who was sold and oppressed. She was taken in by Yuehong's father and entered a Yue Opera choir in the countryside. Refusing to let Yuehong stay with the male guests after performing, Chunhua was humiliated publicly by being tied to a pillar in town. People walking by, dull and powerless, only watched her suffer, except another child bride with the same miserable fate came over to fetch her some water. Ironically, fragments of a feudal society like this undoubtedly act as a great satire on humanity. When Chunhua and Yuehong got the opportunity to perform on stage in Shanghai, a city filled with money, luxury, dissipation, and all kinds of greed, their integrity and morality as strong women eventually got tested in front of desire and attacked by the fragility of human nature. For the two sisters, they gradually found their stand ground shaken - for the rest of the society, they were actresses, a career being looked down upon by many in the feudal society; they are also women, another interiority on top of their career. They thought they could just perform, but things are much more complicated than that. They soon find contradictions in their lives where they can no longer solely focus on their career. The benchmark of human nature is distorted, and many people lost themselves and their moral judgment in front of temptation and greed. They start to sink into an abysmal. While the morality of Yuehong can't resist the demonic call of human fragility, Chunhua can stand by her truth and moral ground. She firmly believes that she

will gain wisdom and truth by sticking to her principles and those taught to her in the theater. The contrast between Chunhua and Yuehong represents the direction of Chinese feminism during this époque, which leads to believe that the ultimate happiness of women results in independence and strong integrity and needs to be separated from the traditional values of Chinese women from a feudal society. In contrast to Chunhua, Yuehong's actions and mentality represent the typical thoughts of women at that time - they don't believe in their ability and consider the best life a female actress may achieve is through what is offered by an influential man. So Yuehong is willing to handle her life in the hands of men and nothing can wake her up. Blinded, she was dragged down in her abysmal morality by the weight of greed and temptation. Her break-off of friendship with Chunhua also indicates a male-dominated society's unthinkable temptation to women. Simone de Beauvoir once commented on this typical path of women in a patriarchal society in her book *The Second Sex*, in which she states, "...but it is an easy road; on it, one avoids the strain involved in undertaking an authentic existence" [5]. Yuehong blames Chunhua for being unworldly and ignorant of the society to which she dreams of belonging. Yuehong also insisted on wearing the gold ring, a gift from Mr. Tang, in her performances, which also symbolizes her pertinence to the male dominance under social pressure and endless temptations from men in a feudal society.

### 3. CONTEMPORARY CHICK FLICKS

Later, when it comes to the current twenty-first century, because of the influence of Western commercialism and consumerism, Chick Flicks films emerged in China. This new type of movie introduces many attractive and newfangled elements, yet quite distinct from the traditional feminist movies in terms of whether a sense of profound reflection and self-consciousness as women is provoked in the audience. Since the 2000s, the film industry in mainland China has been set off by a wave of unimaginable "chick flicks" due to the above Western influence. The mother of all these types of chick flicks in mainland China is originated from the movie *Sophie's Revenge* which aired in 2009 [6]. This romantic comedy starring two of the biggest Chinese celebrities inevitably hit the highest sale by popularity and accidentally started the wave of this new genre of movies in modern millennial China. The film focuses more on the combination of love and action scenes. As a movie with women audience as the target market, the genre of chick flicks is very different from the previous Chinese "feminist movies", which focuses and emphasizes more on the soul awakening, women's independence, and resistance to male dominance in difficult situations, and the tragic fates of women of the époque. It seems that the modern girls in chick flicks may freely engage in any dating scenarios that they choose,

including unconventional and controversial ones such as one-night stands, pregnancies out-of-wedlock, abortions, and extramarital affairs. Compared to their foremothers a century ago, these women in the 2000s chick flicks enjoy their autonomy to the fullest by taking active engagement and initiatives in the game of dating and marriage.

*Sophie's Revenge* puts forward the figure of a modern woman who is courageous and unfettered. Cartoonist Sophie is a lovely lighthearted girl, who has a handsome and intelligent boyfriend, Jeff. Sophie becomes the most fortunate girl in the world after Jeff's proposal. However, Jeff meets the famous film star Wang Jingjing and falls in love with her. This fact strikes Sophie, and she becomes sick at home. She suddenly comes up with a crazy idea that she will win Jeff back in two months. She draws her plans in comics and wants to use the method to win back her true love. Dramatically, during her process, Sophie meets a photographer named Changrui. Sophie asks Changrui to help her, but they soon find themselves attracted by each other. Sophie realizes that Changrui is the person she loves and eventually chooses to stay with Changrui. This movie is a romantic comedy designed to entertain the audience.

Chick flicks flourishes essentially from the influence of Western consumerism, as the contemporary consumerism culture focuses on the viewing effect of commodity images from the scope of modern women, encouraging them to equal their rising spending power to the ability to acquire anything they desire in life, with no restraints nor preoccupation [7]. Women in the 2000s China gradually started to show their position in the male-female power struggle by showing more monetary possession and their equal ability to achieve similar social status as men do. In addition to the drastic focus in the Chinese cinema, female images originated from those edgy and highly educated young white-collar women in metropolitan cities fill up everyday stories. In this era of consumerism and postmodernism, the basis of feminism has shifted to a new derivative, which gives birth to a by-product of "New Chinese Feminism", advocating that women can live life in the way they desire and purchase things that they couldn't afford without a man's help. In other words, modern consumerism secretly manipulates its young female audience that the purchasing power of modern females equals the likelihood to obtain happiness in their busy modern lives, in which men play a big part, inevitably.

Unlike the traditional Western-influenced Chinese feminism movement, this so-called Neo-Feminism, on the superficial level, may seem that it began to advocate for deeper female consciousness and a re-evaluation of gender differences to show female power and strong characters, gradually replacing the stereotype of women being the weaker sex. Using the lively context of chick clicks, the idea of rooting a modern woman's independence, self-worth, and self-realization in her

journey of achieving fulfillment becomes extremely empowering to the main audience. These new images of modern Chinese women are also westernized, as we may notice in the movie *Sophie's World*, implementing the male protagonist educated in the exterior and the design of modern buildings in the movie influenced by a "New York" style.

*Sophie's Revenge* speaks female perspective which has subverted the traditional Chinese women's roles in a patriarchal society, whether we look at it from the perspective of plot analysis, settings, the usage of a camera - which mainly focuses on women. The shift of concentration expresses the director's purpose of manifesting modern feminism, or in this case, Neo-Feminism in China, through the lens of modern women who wish to work, be independent; and achieve their dreams without limitations [8]. These details shouldn't be overlooked when we analyze the connection between the Neo-Feminism movement and its effects on Chinese cinema.

As it was discussed above, the definition of feminism must be defined first as it generates a very contradictory and controversial point of view in many societies. In our contemporary millennial society, we may conclude that at least, feminism is a movement that provokes gender consciousness, and it is of its own an active social school of thought. Simone de Beauvoir, again, in her book *The Second Sex*, once concluded that it is through the lens of males that females know their roles and see themselves, and it is through constructive discrimination and criticism against women that the latter began to stand up on their own feet. We may use the above to explain what post-modern feminism is in a narrower sense. From the launch of *Sophie's Revenge*, it seems that more movies thrive to understand modern women's consciousness from a female-oriented audience's perspective and thus begin to focus on modern women's independence rather than their dependence on their male counterparts. It is important to consider these cultural trends when we view these "neo-feminist" films in China, as they are not purely feminist movies. They speak for women, focus on women, and talk about women's lives - they advocate for the pursuit of gender equality in modern society. Yet, it is also significant to notice that the era of the 2000s is also an era that provokes a huge increase of modern consumerism in mainland China [9]. With the fast growth of recent GDP and a new population of millennials growing up under the benefit of globalization, whether the development of feminism in China reflects true feminism is up for serious debate. Some roles of women continue to be objectified in these chick flicks movies and we will look at these reasons from the following aspects.

First of all, in these chick clicks, male characters still seem to be the center of attention for females, and they continue to consist of the main positions in the movie. Every move of the female protagonists is motivated by

provoking some type of emotions, such as attention and jealousy in the male protagonist. In this context, female characters are still objectified in Chinese movies in these millennial modern films. It is not surprising that most Chinese movies in the 2000s, heavily influenced by the Hollywood and western influence of consumerism and a "fast-food" culture provoked "Saturday night movies", are full of sexual connotation and romanticism [10]. A lot of the scenes, sexually provocative, were not allowed to be aired in the 60s and the 70s under the Chinese Cultural Revolution, are now eye-catching and extremely popular among young people in their early 20s. These sexually provocative scenes are mainly from the male's perspective, such as a close-up to the crotch area of a woman's short skirt or the way she moves while walking. It is still another form of men manipulating modern women to think that the latter is in control while men are the ones who comment and pick and choose the roles they would like to see on screen in modern Chinese cinema. It is not sexually provocative; it seems that people usually lose their interest in watching these films as these movies are tailored for busy-working young white collars who just want to laugh and chill after a whole week of stress. We may thus suspect that the influence of Western consumerism does have a visible effect on the continuation of male dominance in Chinese cinema in the 2000s, contradictory to what the feminists may conclude. These films are coded with male desires and sexually manipulative messages in Mandarin, starred by many lines of Wang Jingjing in want of seducing Jeff. In this way, these millennial chick flicks film shout out "this is still a man's world" through a new story, a new context, and a new way of manipulation.

In addition, the positive side that this chick flicks movies contribute to the modern feminist movement is the portray of female protagonists in the movies. The presentation of these women is manifested through general equality between men and women, represented by the action of breaking free from the original stereotype of women and traditional constraints of them not being able to progress professionally. As discussed above, traditional Chinese women were not given the option of working and being financially independent of men in a feudal patriarchal society. Though modern Chinese society is still a patriarchal one in a larger context, many women are encouraged to take on the professional role, influenced by the post-revolutionary Maoist theory<sup>4</sup>. Women in movies such as *Sophie's Revenge*, also put a huge emphasis on positive qualities of women in a large context, such as that women are the representatives of truth and good, strong moralities, and integrity. What's different about these women, from the film's point of view, is that they finally realized their potential and independence in this world, and finally have the courage to face a men's world and jump outside the loop of self-sacrifice and absolute subordination to the men. The women's relationships with men in the film can be of

pure friendship, which is something that is not portrayed in movies of pre-revolutionary China. The directors of these movies desire to deliver the message that women may finally be their masters of fate and take control of their lives instead of receiving complacency and humiliation. They will not depend on the decisions of men nor what society decides for them.

However, it is worth noting that what the two films have in common is that the lives of the female characters in the films still revolve around men. Even in *Sophie's Revenge* movie, it seems that the main drama of the two protagonists' lives comes from fighting for the attention of men. To a certain extent, the audience of chick flicks is catered to the urban white-collar female who subconsciously still receives messages from a traditional Chinese society in which a woman's role is to be a good daughter, a good wife, and a good mother. Society frowned upon it if a woman chooses to be single for the rest of her life. Under this context, the ideology of a male-dominated society is hinted to the audience. In *Sophie's Revenge* film, it is deliberately exaggerated, under the influence of Western consumerism, that women can obtain substantial material achievements, including love, ironically, if they are independent and working hard, a value that strengthens our suspension of the influence of consumerism. The idea of consumerism focuses only on the realization of commodity value yet fails to bring attention to the price these women pay for the acquisition of these items. The film's manifestation of this type of feminism is not actual feminism, but a virtual and imaginary one. It is a product that caters to a largely female audience for its power of consumerism. Equating feminism with consumption power is not conducive to feminism in the film. It may also bring deviations in values to the audience. We must suspect that such films imply that Chinese post-modern feminism reflects a strong impact from Western consumerism in the early 2000s.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Chinese movies' development was greatly influenced by several ideologies, as the audience can see the trend of feminism in different periods. It is obvious that women still took a basic role in society and need to rely on men to survive in the 1960s. Yet when it comes to the twentieth century, female characters started to have independent personalities. Overall, the scope of the movie *Two Stage Sisters*, focusing on Chinese women's struggles and their paths to independence, reflects the power conflict among feudalism, bourgeoisie, and socialism and how Chinese feminism battles against the old feudalist traditions to promote women's independence in the post-revolutionary China, while *Sophie's Revenge*, influenced by the western consumerism, included numerous exaggerated eye-

catching elements, and symbolized the integration of Chinese and Western cultures. Though movies from these two eras consist of different styles and ways of expression and some feminist ideas are being presented in both periods, the journey of Chinese movies' development reflects a stronger feminist idea in the Chinese movies from the 1960s than their millennial production, due to a heavy influence of fast-food culture and consumerism.

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