

Trend of the Feminism Development in Modern China 1950s-2000s by Analyzing Chinese Female-themed Movies

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ABSTRACT

The changes in women's life in China from the 1950s to the 2000s can be analyzed by women-themed films. This article distinguishes between popular films and niche films by distinguishing female-themed films in the 1950s, 1980s and 2000s, and through comparative analysis, which summarizes the development and breakthroughs of Chinese feminism in these three periods, and uses Chinese female-themed films as the material to summarize the development trend of Chinese feminism since the 1950s.

Keywords: Chinese feminism, Chinese films, Feminist films, Women themed films, Niche films

1. INTRODUCTION

Female-themed movies in modern China are valuable and important sources to analyze how Chinese women's lives have changed in the past decades. Some studies on important Chinese female-themed movies have been done, but this also makes the English academic circles pay more attention to the well-known films in the research of modern Chinese female films. In addition, some problems neglected due to the commercial nature of films, and the missing of the trend of the whole feminism development process from the 1950s to 2000s due to historical and political reasons, still need to be further studied. This article will examine the problems and overall trend in the development of modern Chinese feminism more comprehensively on the theme of Chinese women through the comparison between mass films and minority films.

This article will discuss female-themed movies in 3 main periods. Analysis and discussions will be explored based on them. Through the horizontal comparison and analysis of popular female films and minority female films in the three periods, this article has approached. Firstly, some women-themed films in China in the 1960s have shown feminist ideas by the strong independent individual ideas inside the social trend of socialist society

concepts; secondly, some women-themed films in China in the 1980s has shown feminist ideas by the breaking of male-dominated relationship between men and women and the start of women reaching economic independence; thirdly, some women-themed films in China in the 2000s have shown feminist development by focusing on women's pursuits and difficulties facing after achieving economic independence. Last but not least, the whole feminist development trend from the 1960s to 2000s in China has been shown by the constant awakening of women's consciousness, the strengthening of women's economic status, the rupture of male dominance, and the balance of the relationship between men and women.

2. POPULAR FILMS AND NICHE MOVIES IN CHINA: THE SITUATION AND THE DIFFERENCE

This article divides the standards of popular movies and niche movies based on different periods. Before the reform and opening up, due to the restrictions of the planned economic system, the structure of China's film and television industry was very simple, most of which were led and invested by relevant government departments. Thus, this article defines popular films in the 1960s and 1980s as official-led films with political and cultural propaganda as the main creative purpose, and niche films as films that pay more attention to the

plight of women in the political and social context. After the reform and opening up, with the development of the market economy, China's film and television industry has also been injected with new vitality, showing more diversification. Thus, this article defines popular movies as movies with strong commerciality, good technology, and more investment, while movies with relatively low cost, marginal subject matter, and no mainstream aesthetics are defined as niche movies [1]. Niche movies are usually more realistic, and pay great attention to the concept of "people", and have a unique perspective. They dare to touch-sensitive subjects and directly hit social pain points. Therefore, they have high research value [2].

2.1 WOMEN THEMED FILMS IN THE 1950S IN CHINA

Compared with the films aimed at a commercial profit before liberation, the function of socialist films in the 1950s changed fundamentally and became a favorable tool to promote social relations and publicize Marxism. Therefore, the definition of female images in mainstream films and Minority Films in the 1950s excluded the factor of the box office. During this period, a large number of proletarian female images represented by worker and peasant women appeared. Chinese female directors, who are historically absent in China's film market, also appeared for the first time. Sun Ming and Che Jinglei pointed out in *Mirror Image*: "the emergence of Chinese female directors and female films belongs to a cultural landscape supported by new ideas. It is the inevitable result of the women's Liberation Movement under the guidance of the CPC Central Committee after the founding of new China. It breaks the traditional male-centered monopoly ideology"[3]. However, the historical position of Chinese female directors is not the decisive factor to distinguish between "minority female films" and "mass female films" in this period. It is the director's genre and ideology.

We roughly divide the screen female images in the 1950s into two kinds. The first is the female images in mainstream films, such as sister Ma Fen and Jin Fen in *The Song of The Red Flag*. The emergence of these proletarian workers and peasants' female images is not only a powerful achievement in the construction of the female discourse system of people's films but also a cultural embodiment of the improvement of women's status. Compared with the on-screen female images as the object of male desire and the carrier of cultural sadness before liberation, the female images created by mainstream films in this period are undoubtedly progressive. They successfully dispel the morphological discourse of male chauvinism consciousness in the past, but also make women no longer exist as an independent gender group. "To gain is to give again"[4]. After being redeemed by male Communists, these former sufferers have also become propagandists of the new society and

male heroines. However, in this process, individual growth also melts in the group, which is the so-called "group image". Women have become social symbols who do not know what gender is, and their self-consciousness and personal characteristics have disappeared.

The other part is the female images created by the left-wing filmmakers, such as Lin Daojing in the song of youth and the second sister in the story of Liubao. The number of women in this category is less than that in the first category, which we can call "female images in Minority Films". The classification of "mass" and "minority" here should introduce a concept called "heterogeneity". "Heterogeneity" refers to the incommensurability between types, especially between different types of attributes of the same individual thing [5]. The female roles in the *Song of youth* and the story of Liubao are different from the socialist female images on the screen in the 1950s. They truly portray women's survival dilemma and highlight their character and emotion. Behind these female images are left-wing workers deeply influenced by Shanghai film tradition. Left-wing workers are mainly divided into two categories: the first category is left-wing filmmakers such as Tian Han and Xia Yan who joined the Communist Party before the war of resistance against Japan, and the second category is innovative filmmakers such as Shi Dongshan and Cai Chusheng. They are obviously different from Yan'an film schools deeply influenced by socialist art aesthetics, such as Yuan Muzhi.

Left-wing films rose in the 1930s. They created tragic female images bound by morality and ethics, such as Wei Ming in new women, to attack the current social situation. Not only that, but the left-wing filmmakers also discussed the will and principles: does cheating mean the body or the soul? The conventional standard must be the truth? Do women want to bind their will for the word "Virtue"? Left-wing films focus on women's inner emotional world and finding a way out. They are the discussion of the social problems behind the heroine. In the cultural context of socialism in the 1950s, all these advantages were preserved in the female images created by left-wing filmmakers. Not only that, "proletarianization" is that these different feminisms have further changed in the socialist period. For example, Lin Daojin in the song of youth not only inherits the strong individual consciousness of women in the left-wing films but also absorbs the firm revolutionary spirit of proletarian women. In Wang Ping and Chinese socialist women's film - mainstream feminist culture, multi-dimensional subject practice and embedded author identity, Wang Lingzhen and Xiao Hua believe that "heterogeneous women show a trend of breaking away from the private sphere and striving for discourse position in the public sphere" [6]. Specifically, women move from the private sphere of the family to the public sphere of society and complete the process of running away under the control of the mainstream consciousness. This kind of departure

makes them get rid of the image of being led and saved, and this process is quite complex, but it is in the process of women's struggle for the right to speak in the public sphere that women's real situation can be seen. It can be said that heterogeneous female films (minority female films) have the advantages of film art under two political systems: they not only continue the spiritual context of left-wing progressive films but also realize the transformation from citizen films to people's films [7].

"The feminist events in modern Chinese history, such as the anti-traditional urban freedom in the May 4th era, feminism, the trend of individual feminism, the left-wing feminist criticism in the 1930s and the feminist practice dominated by proletarian women, have been incorporated into the feminist cultural practice of socialist China." Wang Lingzhen and Xiao Hua said this in Wang Ping and Chinese socialist female films - mainstream feminist culture, multi-dimensional subject practice, and embedded author identity. Though different from ideology, aesthetics and life are different, but these minority works together with mainstream films have constructed China's socialist feminism in the 1950s. So, the feminist films of this era are doubtless advanced. It is worth noting that some of the advanced films of the minority film are given by mainstream movies.

It is worth noting that, the film narratives about women in China's two eras (1949-1976 and 1976 to now, i.e., before and after the Cultural Revolution) are connected by the image of "mother". The images of women, mother and earth mother in the film are still heavy, overloaded or pluralistic historical existence "[8]. Compared with the fourth and the fifth generation of male directors in mainstream films, they transplanted male cultural dilemmas onto women. The female directors (Huang Shuqin, Zhang Wenxin, etc.) in the 4th and the 5th generation broke the symbolic image of "she is in his mirror". Therefore, it is not a complete standard to roughly distinguish the female images in mass films and Minority Films in this period.

2.2 WOMEN THEMED FILMS IN THE 1980S IN CHINA

The female images in mainstream films in the 1980s are still hymns of traditional women. Women in this period seem to get rid of the imitation of men and the fate of being portrayed as group images, but they return to the gaze of men from earth mother, saint, and evil water. This situation is particularly obvious in the works of male directors such as Zhang Yimou and Xie Jin. Qu Yajun pointed out in *"Women's Tolerance for Pleasing Themselves"* - women's criticism of male films, Zhang Yimou's women (such as the red lantern hanging high) are the objects of men's sexual fantasy, thirst, peeping, and fear [9]. Guo (1997) believes that in the narration of women in the context of male authoritative discourse, Xie Jin's works, whether mothers with profound

righteousness or brave female soldiers are standardized into a certain same character, which shows a kind of personality "Virgin feelings"[10]. They are the sustenance and snuggle of men's hearts. They are a typical female image that exists to serve men. But this is far from women's own life and emotional experience. As male directors, they naturally can't detect this male gaze. Therefore, for a long time, such an image was favored by male directors and occupied the mainstream of the screen.

Such mainstream film women can be summarized in three points: traditional image, original sin consciousness, and male attachment. A typical example is Hu Yinsheng, who is not only representative of traditional Chinese female images but also a female image that can be recognized by the public in a patriarchal society. As a famous film by famous director Xie Jin, "Furong Town" achieved good box office results in that year. Famous directors and masterpieces naturally have a wide audience, that is, the popular films and mainstream films in our mouths. As a scarring film, the first role of the theme of Furong Town must be reflection and comfort, and Hu, as the image of the virgin, must be optimistic, cured, and repay good for evil. Even the ending is a perfect reunion, and the kind heroine finally gains happiness. Hu Yuying's image of a typical heroic mother may not be entirely to cater to the tastes of male audiences. She also has the presentation of desire and a certain spirit of resistance, but this consciousness of "traditional image", "original sin consciousness" and "taking men as saviors" is deeply embedded in people's mainstream consciousness, in other words, even such an image did not offend the women at that time, because they thought so. Therefore, the mainstream films directed by men for the public only grafted the patriarchal culture into the feminist culture. It seems to be telling the story of women's desire, but it is still full of men's desire.

However, in the relatively small number of female-directed films, this model has finally been broken. Men changed from the subject of narration to the object of narration and even became supporting actors, while women began to try to master the right of discourse and narrate the whole film from their perspective. Therefore, the female images in the works of minority female directors began to try to get rid of symbolization, try to present the real emotional state of women and get rid of the image of the desired object. Although there are still many limitations in the female images in the female directors' works in this period, a well-deserved female film - human ghost feelings by Huang Shuqin were born. Because it is impossible to create another language system in the patriarchal discourse, the film borrows Hua Mulan style techniques to interpret the growth process of Qiu Yun. The process is vivid and delicate, and truly shows the heroine's emotional changes and mental process. "Is a woman who has a career but loses love successful?". This paper probes into the real cultural dilemma faced by women from the psychological level.

In order to escape from this cultural dilemma and all kinds of hardships in life, Qiu Yun chose to disguise himself as a man again and again, But the absence of growing men also made her doubt this existing gender thinking mode (men are heroes and save women). The director also implied the replacement of gender roles through the lens of Qiu Yun dressing up in front of the mirror, from a woman dressing up as Zhong Kui. Some critics believe that this film is: "An image of the historical fate of modern women, an image that refuses and tries to escape women but has not been saved."

Compared with the male guide in the same period, the box office masterpiece, the popular theme, the female images in began the 80s minority movies are more advanced. These minority female films made by female directors deeply and delicately analyze women's growth path. They have the awakening of "dare and dare". Career and image are no longer limited to a good wife and mother, but more diversified. The image of women also breaks away from the object of men's gaze and desire and shines into reality from their own perspective.

2.3 WOMEN THEMED FILMS IN THE 2000S IN CHINA

After entering the 21st century, a large number of female-themed movies appeared in China. In 2000, the government of the People's Republic of China issued related policy documents to make the "cultural industry" legal, and in 2001 issued a new "Film Management Regulations" to regulate the film market [11]. Based on this policy background, coupled with the expansion of the demands for movies of Chinese movie audiences, after the introduction of a large number of foreign films and the reduction of restrictions on the themes of Chinese films after the Reform and Opening-up in 1978, a large number of female-themed Chinese films have appeared. Based on the social background of the improvement of women's economic status and the strengthening of the concept of equality between men and women [12], there are roughly two types of female-themed popular movies in the Chinese film market.

One type is more focusing on women without independent economic positions. At the same time, these films have shown a Realistic creative trend [7]. '*Nuan*' (2003) tells a story of a woman who was forced to stay in the countryside economically supported by her husband, because of her disability and was abandoned twice by men she loved. *Life Show* (2002) tells a story of a woman who suffered a failure in relationships while successfully protecting her interests and her family. While these films focus on discussing the real environment, they also pay more attention to expressing women's demands.

Another type is more focusing on middle-class women in cities. However, unlike Realistic subject selection, these films present a more idealistic and less

serious story model accompanied by stronger commerciality. For example, "*Sophia's Revenge*" (2009) and "*Go LA LA Go!*" (2010), taking urban middle-class women with independent economic status as the protagonist, and pay more attention to discussing the spiritual aspirations of these female groups. Although these films also reflect the background of reality, they are still biased compared with the works of realism, because they pursue commercial returns.

However, there is another type, which not only takes urban middle-class women as the protagonist but also has a profound reality. There is an intertextual relationship between the three women in "Found You" (2018) [13], and at the same time, they are all closely related to the real social environment. Li Jie is the representative of independent women of the urban middle class, with independent and strong financial ability, be proud of their career, get rid of dependence on men and marriage so that they can compete for custody of their children after divorce. Li Jie's dilemma lies in the difficulty of reconciling career and family. This deeply reflects an important practical issue in the development of contemporary Chinese feminism, namely whether it is necessary to abandon his identity as a wife and mother for the sake of economic autonomy and career pursuit. Furthermore, if women want to fulfill their responsibilities as wives or mothers and give up career development, the results may not be effective. This other important realistic feminist dilemma is clearly manifested in Zhu Min. Zhu Min chose to resign and become a full-time wife after getting married. This is because she was considered unable to raise her children after the divorce, which caused her to fight against the cruel reality by suicide. The third female protagonist in the movie, Sun Fang, represents a group of women in the middle and lower classes in the city, who had to commit bad crimes to survive. This is a character that is connected with reality and at the same time has a cautionary flavor. When the lack of women's economic status is accompanied by men who cannot provide survival support, and the disconnection of women from the city, extreme results may occur.

The new women in the movie and the group of new women they represent are mainly manifested in three aspects, which are the awakening of women's subjective and independent consciousness, the loss of control of male characters and the relatively balanced relationships between men and women [14]. However, with these improvements in Feminism development, there are more difficulties for women, because the social environment is also changing. From the view of urbanization, the spillover effects of economic development will affect the socio-cultural level. For example, derailments appearing in movies have become more common in the realization, because the development of urbanization has brought more convenient transportation, and developed networks and communications have provided them with

convenient conditions [15]. The awakening of women's independent consciousness and the strengthening of their independent abilities will inevitably have a natural impact on traditional women's social roles, exacerbating issues such as gender antagonism in marriage, workplace relations, and status antagonism in mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this article has compared and analyzed women-themed films in the 1950s, 1980s and 2000s in China. Through comparison and analysis, we find that China's feminism has developed rapidly, involving women from all walks of life, and is closely linked to changes in the social environment. The development in the 1950s showed the strong independent individual ideas inside the social trend of socialist society concepts; the improvement in the 1980s had shown feminist ideas by the breaking of male-dominated relationship between men and women and the start of women reaching economic independence. In the 2000s, the film progress had illustrated the female's pursuits and difficulties facing after being economically independent. The whole feminist development trend from the 1950s to 2000s in China had shown by the constant awakening of women's consciousness, the strengthening of women's economic status, the rupture of male dominance, and the balance of the relationship between men and women. For further research on this topic, this article suggests that researchers could focus on more the impact of spillover effects caused by socio-economic development on all aspects of social life, and how these changes directly or indirectly affect the generation and changes of the predicaments faced by women in the future, as well as these changes and predicaments and the development of feminism Interdependent and contradictory relationship.

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