

# Analysis of Two Chinese Female Characters in The 1930s to 1960s Movie

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## ABSTRACT

In the late Qing Dynasty, feminism was introduced into China. Under the influence of many aspects, feminism in China gradually develop, which was reflected in many films. This paper mainly analyzes the female characters in the 1930s-1960s based on two films, *New Women* and *Two Stage Sisters*. There are many similarities and differences in the lives of the three main characters in the two films. We will make a multi-faceted analysis mainly from the perspectives of history, family background, politics of the period, and the way of expression in the film.

**Keywords:** *Female characters, feminism development, society, influence*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There were many meaningful classic female roles in the Chinese film industry during the 1930s-1960s, which we were learned from Cinematic Genre, Gender Perspective, and the Construction of Figure: Female Figures in Early Chinese Comedies (Before 1949) [1]. The film produced in the 1930s-1960s expresses the development of feminism in China. This essay is mainly focused on two films, *New Women* and *Two Stage Sisters*, to analyze Chinese female characters in the 1930s to 1960s movies. These two films are typically represented female status in the 1930s-1960s China. The *New Women* was shot in 1934; *Two Stage Sisters* was directed in 1964. Both movie stories were started in 1935 China. During the 1930-the 1960s, China has experienced a lot of events. In 1931, the Japanese invaded three Northeastern Provinces of China, also creating patriotism among people. Until 1945, China ended the War of Resistance Against Japan. 1931-1945 All of these historical events attributed to feminism development. China experienced social upheaval from a feudal society to a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. The people's republic of China has founded the republic in 1949. Since the 1950s, China has been developing into a socialist country. In the 1930s, shanghai was greatly influenced by western culture, especially feminism.

Feminism was first established in the 18th Enlightenment Movement, Rousseau made his opinion

about women that they are inferior, females were biologically different from men, they were supposed to give birth to children, and his idea still belonged to patriarchy. It was introduced in China in Late Qing Dynasty, and Liang Qichao used it with his perspective to save China: Mother build the nation, women should get educated but serve men. In that period, capitalism, modernity, and imperialism were squashed in China. China was a half colonized and half feudal country. The government tried to use Westernization drive to rebuild China. We also knew from A study on the women's liberation movement during the May 4th Movement from the perspective of gender written by Xin Xin[2] that before 1935s, The Revolution of 1911 and 1919 May 4th Movement influenced by the Oct Revolution, led by intellectuals having the Communist ideology cause an individual consciousness in females happened in China, the 1915 Paris Peace Conference arouse patriotically and the magazine *New Youth* also given a spirit of anti-arranged marriage and was liberal-oriented [9]. In this essay, feminism means that women have the right to control their fate and become independent in every aspect. Women can be considered as human beings as men, treated respectfully as men, and not being discriminated against and sexualized. To sum up, Chinese women used to be extremely inferior in feudal society, but after the May 4th Movement they started to have the consciousness of fighting for their rights. In *New Women* and *Two Stage Sisters*, Weiming and Chunhua which are

the main character of each movie are typical female images fighting for their fate.

*New Women* and *Two Stage Sisters* respectively tell the rough life of a female protagonist. *New Women* is mainly focusing on Weiming's life story. After being abandoned by her husband Weiming became a music teacher in Shanghai. Dr. Wang, a member of the school board loved Weiming, but Weiming ignored him. Dr. Wang retaliated against Weiming by firing her out of the school. Then, Weiming's daughter became ill, but Weiming could not pay the fee. Forced by life, Weiming was forced to prostitute herself. But she met Dr. Wang. Weiming slapped Dr. Wang across the face and ran out. Back home, Weiming's daughter was dying of illness and Weiming suicide. Yuhaitao took Weiming to the hospital, and when Weiming woke. after being inspired by Aying, she shouted "I'll live, I'll take revenge". However, Weiming is still dead in the end. *Two Stage Sisters* mainly talks about two girls, Xing Yuehong and Zhu Chunhua, who grow up in a troupe in the countryside. After Xing Shifu died, they signed a contract, which was letting Yuehong and Chunhua act in Shanghai without paying for three years to bury Xing Shifu. After she came to Shanghai, she became a very popular actress for a while, but she offended many people because of her lofty attitude. However, Yuehong was bewildered by money and status. Yuehong married manager Tang who controlled the troupe in Shanghai. Shang Shuihua, a famous actress, was suicide since she was abundance by manager Tang. After Shangshuihua's suicide, Chunhua went to argue with Manager Tang, but tang and his party used Shangshuihua's death to make profits. Then Chunhua realized that the sisters should unite against these evil forces. Under the guidance of reporter Jiangbo, Chunhua and her sisters have their theatre and successfully performed. Finally, Chunhua reformed Xingyuehong and helped Yuehong turn over a new leaf.

This essay will make a multi-faceted analysis of these two films mainly from the perspectives of history, family background, politics of the period, and the way of expression in the film. This essay begins by discussing the background of 1930s-1960s China and the storyline of *New Woman* and *Two Stage Sisters*. It then separately describes the backgrounds of each movie. Subsequently, the essay compares *New Women* and *Two Stage Sisters* to know similarities and differences and what causes them.

## 2. COMPARISON OF TWO MOVIES

Both of the storylines in *New Women* and *Two Stage Sisters* begin in the 1935s. These two films also have the same main idea, political and historical background.

First, In *New women*, the main character, Weiming, did not like to involve in activities that insult human rights in the Dancing house. She felt disgusting after watching that show. This represents that the public cannot

bear with upper-class insult and tried to revolt the upper-class control. Besides, the director tried to imply that the capitalists were exploding the lower class by showing the difference between the daily work of workers and the upper class. Also, Wei Ming got fired because Dr. Wang who was rich and powerful wanted her and used his power to let her lose her job. This represents that in Dr.Wang's opinion, women were merely personal belongings to men, and he could use his power to dominate the middle or lower class. In *Two Stage Sisters*, Chunhua was against Manager Tang and his party bravely, and she also escaped from her child bride's identity at the beginning of the movie. Chunhua believed injustice and did not give Manager Tang any opportunity to frame up her sister Yuehong. This represents the lower classes rebelled against the upper classes' use of power to enforce privilege. The director also wanted to imply women's negative situation to the audience. For instance, after Yuehong and Tang got married, she was forced to stay at home and was forbidden to work. Tang treated her as a maid and gave her mental and physical violence. There was a similarity between Weiming and Chunhua in that they were both being forced to compromise as they struggle against oppression. These characters assembled some features of women at that period that they were considered inferior and were suffering in the pressure of patriarchy, which was a classic female figure on the screen from 1930 to 1960. In addition, the two movies' stories are both started when China was still in a half feudal society with a small amount of capitalism. There is a symbol in *Two Stage Sisters*. Chunhua started as an escaped child bride. Child bride was a product of feudal society. Also, Chunhua was tied to a stone pillar by officials for offending a landlord. It can be seen that the social situation at that time still had a certain state of corrupt officials in power. Additionally, in *New Women*, Weiming's family were still believed in an arranged marriage. This shows that a vestige of feudal thought. Both of these films reflect that women are rebelling against and trying to change the social norm that does not respect women.

Second, With the Marxist theory was introduced in China, in *New Women*, by using the clock as the media, the director skillfully presented the way of life of different classes through comparison. In the film, while Weiming dances and enjoys drinks at dance halls, workers are building the railroad in the sun. As an educated woman, Weiming was enjoying entertainment, while the lower-class workers toiled. In addition, Dr. Wang's attempt to get the principal to expel Weiming on the pretext of investing money in the school exemplified how well-educated Dr. Wang bullied an ordinary teacher. In addition, Dr. Wang's attempt to get the principal to expel Weiming on the pretext of investing money in the school exemplified how wealthy Dr. Wang used his upper class' power to bully an ordinary teacher in the working class. There is a significant difference in class life in

China around the 1930s. There is also a movie clip influenced by the May 4th Movement in *Two Stage Sisters*. The main characters, Zhu Chunhua and Xing Yuehong signed an unfair contract with the troupe's leader, and they will not receive any salary for the first three years of their stay in Shanghai. Although Chunhua and Yuehong performed hard, their salaries were all occupied by the troupe's leader. This reflects the social state in which the upper class exploits the fruits of the labor of the lower class. Furthermore, because Chunhua and her sisters put on a play that reflected badly on the government, Manager Tang kicked Zhuchunhua and her sister out of the theater during their contract period, which shows that the upper class exploited the lower class without reason and the conflicts between capitalists and proletarian. Chunhua did not give in and she wanted to act continuously, so she arranged her theater. However, her show was written based on Lu Xun who was considered a communist at that time and it was ironic. Pan thought this was not beneficial for the government at that period. After that Pan instructed Manager Tang to frame Chunhua and finally protected Manager Tang, and instructed Manager Tang to coerce Yuehong to give false testimony in court. All of these reflect the power of the oppression of ordinary people. These movie clips implied that the era had a sense of concern in the lower class and the May 4th movement had a spirit of encouraging them to fight against the exploitation of capitalists and landlords. Both of these films reflect that women are rebelling against and trying to change the social norm that does not respect women. *New Women* expressed the thoughts of the unequal life and work between the upper class and the lower class; *Two Stage Sisters* was more influenced by the May 4th movement, which completely showed the conflicts between classes and represented the pain and struggles of the working class.

Third, these two movies had a similar historical background. Both of their storylines started around 1935s [15]. Before the two movies were shot, the Revolution of 1911, before that there was the 1915 Paris Peace Conference, and the magazine *New Youth* also gave a New Spirit of anti-arranged marriage and was liberal oriented. This strongly influenced Wei Ming's thoughts and these opinions were spread in rural areas where Chunhua lived as well. In 1917, the Oct Revolution was introduced in China, and the 1919 May 4th Movement rose in half federal and half colonized China. Female characters like Weiming and Chunhua who possessed the New Spirit were also certain figures on the screen from the 1930s to 1960s. Women began to resist oppression and strive for equal rights for themselves, which was a representative female image in films at that time. For example, when Dr. Wang proposed to Weiming, she said, "Get married! What do I get when I get married? 'Partner for life'? A slave for life!"; in *Two-Stage Sisters*, Chunhua was against the feudal child bride system and escapes, which reflected her new spirit and opposition to

power and oppression. (This essay defines new spirit as The spirit of the May 4th Movement) Both films reflect The new spirit. The essence of this is that the directors of the two electronic films are deeply influenced by the new spirit, which makes them reflect the new spirit in the plot of the films. After that, the Japanese invaded three Northeastern Provinces of China in 1931, and China had been in a War of Resistance against Japan that lasted for more than 10 years, which had risen the patriotic. Therefore the cinema and movie industry made a certain amount of left wings movies or patriotic movies to attract the audience. 1930 was the golden area of shanghai cinema, women in Shanghai were influenced in various aspects by the flappers in Hollywood movies, including the thoughts of feminism. Before the two movies were shot, the Revolution of 1911, in 1917, the Oct Revolution was introduced in China, and the 1919 May 4th Movement rose in half federal and half colonized China.

Last but not least, the "leading guide" of the protagonists in these two films—Aying and Jiangbo were both known as feminist guides for leading protagonists in films. They can stay awake in a chaotic social environment. They have more advanced thoughts than other women that females need to be independent

### **3. THE CONTRAST OF TWO FEMALE CHARACTERS**

Weiming and Zhuchuhua lived in the same era and lived in similar social environments. However, due to family background, education level, economic ability, different Guider and different cognition of feminism, these factors lead to their completely different fates.

First, their family background was different. Weiming came from a relatively well-off family, while Chunhua is an escaped child bride who grew up in the troupe. Weiming's family is relatively well off and can afford to send her to school. Weiming ran away with the man she loved and was abandoned by the man. So Weiming left the child with her sister and went to Shanghai to make a living as a music teacher. However, Chunhua is an escaped child bride who grew up with the troupe and later went to Shanghai to perform with Yuehong. Weiming was married before heading to Shanghai alone. But Zhuchunhua was a child bride. They grew up in very diverse circumstances. On top of that, Weiming is a mother who is responsible. Weiming had to take on some of the children, which led to her having much concern. But Chunhua is single, and she is not restricted by the outside world. Because the two of them grew up in different families and growth environments, they handled things differently. Weiming ended up working as a prostitute in order to earn money for medical treatment for her children. But Chunhua can stick to herself even when the outside world doesn't believe in her. Chunhua doesn't need to change herself for others. But As a mother, Weiming had to think about her child. Their different

family background indirectly led to different outcomes. Weiming committed suicide when her child died of illness, while Chunhua led the sisters to spread femininity.

Yuehong's life is different from Chunhua's life. Yuehong and Chunhua grew up in the same environment. They were living on acting before entering Shanghai. But since they came to Shanghai, their lives have diverged sharply. Yuehong refuses to act and becomes Manager Tang's wife. She lived the life of a rich lady. But Yuehong's is not as bright as it seems. The change was due to their different family structures. As a child bride, Chunhua knew life was not easy since she was very young. She had a sense of independence since she was very young. But Yuehong was taken care of by her father, and her father loved her very much. She was pure in mind before her father passed away. That's why Yuehong was easily cheated by the big cities and confused by money while Chunhua could stick to her original intention. At the same time, Chunhua knew the darkness and danger of the world, and the simplicity of Yuehong made Yuehong think that new things were beautiful, so she was beaten by society.

Second, their education level is completely different. Weiming is a highly educated woman. She has many upper-class friends around her. However even she knew some upper-class people, she did not take pleasure in seeing others insulted (For example, in dance halls, she refused to watch performances). As she worked and came from a good background, she did not quite understand the travails of lower-class women. That's why she took her own life after her daughter died. In contrast, Chunhua was a countryside child bride from the underclass. She has experienced the inconstancy of human relationships since childhood. She knew from an early age that only hard work and hard training could lead to success. This made her dislike bullying and want to fight back. Besides, it is said that "the one who knows nothing fears nothing." Because Chunhua didn't receive much education, she didn't know much. She was very simple. So when Chunhua stuck to one thing, she thought less than Weiming, who was highly educated. This is also the characteristic that she can persist in and establish a sister theater. Weiming lost hope in life after seeing the darkness of upper-class life, which is why she decided to suicide after the death of her child. Not like Chunhua, who perseveres in resistance when encountering difficulties. Because of their different levels of education, Weiming and Chunhua think differently about things, and that makes their fates different.

Third, their economic ability is also different. Weiming had a heavier life pressure than Chunhua. This is because Weiming has a daughter, and she has to pay for rent and things like the piano. She's under a lot of financial problems. When Weiming rejected Dr. Wang's proposal, Wang cut off her financial resources, leaving her in debt and with little money to treat her child. She

had no money to pay the balance on the piano and it was taken away. She could not afford to send her child to the hospital, so she could only watch her daughter getting sicker day by day and eventually die. There was no way out of the heavy financial pressure, and she lived a difficult and desperate life. That's the main reason why she suicides in the end. Being a mother, Weiming is stigmatized by life. However, as Chunhua lives with a troupe, she doesn't have much need for money. She didn't have a lot of expenses. Her only concern was how to raise money to build a theater for her sisters. Chunhua is not under too much economic pressure, so when she sees Shuangshuihua's death, she dares to argue with Manager Tang. She did not struggle with money problems. However, the lack of money drove Weiming to the point where he prostituted her. Because they live under different pressures, they have different ideas. Although Weiming knows that women need to be independent, economic pressures force them to compromise. Different financial burdens can make a big difference in their final results. Their endings are entirely different. Weiming dies resentful, while Chunhua leads the troupe's sisters to glory.

Fourth, their "leading guide" had diversities as well, which were Aying and Jiangbo. Aying was also a music teacher and she wrote lyrics about female independence. Weiming arranged the lyrics foraying. Aying enlightens Weiming to live. While Jiangbo was a reporter. When Chunhua was angry about Shang Shuihua's death and manager tang's casual attitude that he merely used Shuihua's death to benefit himself. Jiangbo was the only one who supported and understood Chunhua at that time. Jiangbo encouraged Chunhua and constantly guides Chunhua. When Chunhua longed to start her theater, Jiangbo objectively helped her analyze the current situation and supported Chunhua's idea. It was obvious that Jiangbo had a high sense of political awareness and had accepted even higher education. She passed the knowledge and information of how server the society was and the battle between classes.

Although they both serve as an inspiration for the protagonist, their roles are various from each other. Part of the reason is that they had different careers. As a music teacher, Aying usually deals with young, inexperienced students. However, Jiangbo, as a journalist, has her own opinions on social issues, which leads to Aying trying to persuade Weiming to keep her alive, while Jiangbo is constantly leading Chunhua's thoughts. In addition, the two had different influences, Aying mainly influenced the new generation through music, while Jiangbo influenced the adults more. The most important thing is that they have diverse perceptions of feminism. Aying was a woman who was just waking up to feminism. Her cognition of female independence is not comprehensive and systematic. However, Jiang Bo already had a relatively complete feminist thought system. She could not only keep herself sober but also help confused women

around her to find themselves. In addition, Jiang knew there were issues among not only genders but also classes that she directly pointed out the power of capitalism against the lower class and working class.

Last but not least, the main character's understandings of feminism were diverse. In Weiming's cognition, feminism is about independence and not being attached to men. When she published her novel, the manager was willing to show Weiming's gender to attract attention, but she refused and said, "I am selling my fiction, not my gender identity." And when she rejected Wang's proposal, she knew the oppression toward women and resisted her decision firmly that she would not use marriage to trade herself. However, she ignored the factor of her class and Wang's. It illustrates the different ideas in two parts of a period in China, which affect the directors as well. The Marxist and socialist focus not merely on women but also working-class or lower class. It distinguished from the west that western feminism usually concentrated on women but not class, and they only considered the middle class at the beginning. Compared with socialist feminism, western feminism was fighting more for the distribution of property rather than reputation or another abstract social status. Therefore it could be narrower than socialist feminism. Consequently, Weiming's fate was various from Chunhua's.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Base on the discussion above, New Woman and Two-stage sisters are all talking about a female character's life story. By analyzing the three female characters in these two movies, we encountered the question that though the storyline in both of the movies happened during the 1930s-1960s, the protagonists come to diverse experiences. Weiming and Zhu Chunhua have experienced difficulties and finally realized women needed to become independent. During their life journey, they were influenced by many factors and had different endings. We conclude that the development and formation of women's independent ideological system and their fates are affected by the social environment. The previous researches we found were focused on one movie while we compared two movies together. The focus of this paper is different from other papers in that the previous papers mainly focus on the propaganda of the political ideas in the two films. This paper mainly discusses how women are reflected through movies. At the same time, the reasons for the different formations are analyzed by comparison and contrast. Furthermore, this paper makes a comparison of two female film themes in the same period in the 1930s-1960s. In addition, the analysis of the tragic fate of female characters in other papers mostly emphasizes that it is caused by females' weakness. But this paper analyzes the influence of women's environment and the limitations of the times. The main part of this paper mainly analyzed the theme of

the two films, the historical and political background of the 1930s-1960s. In addition, the article mainly evaluated Weiming and Chunhua's different fates due to their family background, education level, economic ability, ideological guiders, and their different attitudes toward women.

Since authors are only two students in college and high school with little academic knowledge, some analyses and examples may not be very precise and accurate. On the other hand, the material is not enough. Owing to the complexity of the conflicts between adults and children, it is really necessary to conduct some further research about it in the future by acquiring an increasing number of material and data support.

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