



The Research on the Construction of Female Images in the Chinese Female-Themed Film *The Fall*

Haoyi Wang^(✉)

Graduat School, Beijing Normal University - Hong Kong Baptist University United International College, Zhuhai City 519000, China
r130232088@mail.uic.edu.cn

Abstract. In the past, female images in movies were always accompanied by male gaze, which was regarded as the carrier of male desire. With the spread of the “MeToo” movement (a global feminist social movement) around the world, it not only triggered extensive discussions in various fields such as politics, academia and culture, but also promoted the enhancement of female consciousness, and the female images in films also changed accordingly. Under the background of this era, this paper discusses that the female images in the female-themed film *The Falls* are based on the female perspective, and the mother-daughter relationship of spiritual exchange is used as the incision to truly express the difficulties women face in life. *The Falls* depicts the female images who grow up in difficulties and help each other, aiming to express that the awakening of female consciousness and the construction of female images complement each other in the film, they are based on women’s psychology and emotion, The awakening of female consciousness gives women more opportunities and courage to express themselves boldly, and at the same time gives more attention and encouragement to the difficulties faced by women.

Keywords: Female-themed films · Female image · Mother-daughter relationship · Female consciousness

1 Introduction

Since *The Falls* release in Taiwan, China on October 29 in 2021, as an art-house film, it has achieved a box office of NT \$36 million, ranking seventh among domestic films in Taiwan in 2021. *The Falls* will last in Taiwan on Jan. 28, exactly three months after its release. The following day, On January 29, *The Falls* premiered exclusively on international streaming giant Netflix.

The Falls, directed by Mong-Hong Chung, premiered at the Horizon section of the 78th Venice Film Festival. It is also Chung’s second film to represent Taiwan in the Oscar for Best International Picture. *The Falls* also received 11 nominations at the 58th Golden Horse Awards, winning four awards including best original screenplay, Best Original film Score, Best Actress and Best Feature Film. In the movie *The Falls*, Alyssa Chia as

the mother, Pin-Wen Luo, Gingle Wang as the daughter, Xiao Jing, and Lee-Zen Lee as the ex-husband Qi-Wen Wang. The film mainly tells the story of Pin-Wen Luo, a single mother, and her daughter, Wang Jing, struggling to survive together in Taiwan, which was hit by the COVID-19 in 2020.

The film begins one morning when Pin-Wen Luo urges her daughter Xiao Jing to go to class. The daughter is indifferent to her mother. When the mother of the strong woman into the office has received the company to require employees to reduce their own salary mail, and then received a call from her daughter in the meeting, her daughter said that the class diagnosed, so the mother took her daughter home for home isolation, but received a call from the boss, let her not into the company. Mother and daughter live in an apartment that is undergoing a waterproof facelift renovation, and the entire building is covered in a blue shade that glows dull blue. The mother summoned the divorced father, complaining of being driven mad by the gloomy blue light, of the generation gap with her adolescent daughter, and of being politely rebuffed when she tried to get more physical with her divorced husband. One night mother was scared to wake up from the storm outside the window, found that small quiet was not in the room, mother rushed into the heavy rain, kept calling for her daughter. The next scene is quite quiet in the living room phone rings, Jing answered the phone was informed that her mother in the hospital. It turned out that Pin-Wen Luo was suffering from “sensory disorder”, commonly known as schizophrenia. Under the COVID-19, Pin-Wen Luo still misses divorced ex-husband, she was forced to lose her jobs, cannot afford high loans, have a daughter with a generation gap, and the tense social environment leads to mothers’ emotions falling like waterfalls. Daughter Xiao Jing is experiencing the pain that the rebellion of adolescence and parental divorce bring to her as a senior three student, after being informed that mother is ill, grow rapidly in the process that takes care of mother. Until the move to see her father, she like a flood of water, toward his father questioned, why she had to bear all this? Through her catharsis, all grievances are gathered into a stream. Accompanied and cured by her daughter, the mother’s mental state improved and became calm. Mom and Xiao Jing live a new peaceful life after moving.

The female images in the film are mainly mothers and daughters. As a single mother, under the pressure of work and life, Pin-Wen Luo was overwhelmed and suffered from “thinking disorder”. This is a broken image of a mother. The adolescent daughter Xiao Jing has conflicts and generation gap with her mother. After knowing that her mother is ill, Xiao Jing assumes the role of “mother” in the family and is a “caregiver” image.

2 Literature Review

Female film is the product of feminist movement, but its definition is not clear enough, and there are many interpretations. Judith Mayne, a film theorist, defines women’s films from two aspects: female audience and female director [1]. On this basis, Yuli Ying defined “women’s film” in the Outline of The History of Women’s Film not simply refers to films directed by women or with female protagonists. The exact meaning of film should be a film, video, DV and multimedia experimental work directed by a woman with a female topic as the creative perspective and with a clear female consciousness [1]. The above two definitions of “female film” strictly require female directors and have certain limitations on the gender identity of creators.

With the development and progress of The Times and thoughts of thought, more and more scholars have put forward statements with more reference value and significance for the definition of “women’s film”. In what is “Women’s Film”, Li Xiao divides women’s film into three meanings: “The first refers to films with female themes or themes; the second refers to western feminist films, which reflect the western women’s liberation movement in the film field; the third refers to films with strong female consciousness shot by female directors [2]. Li Xiao lists several films in the article, all of which focus on the situation and psychological state of women and have the colour of feminism. But still put women in a passive position, does not reflect the subjectivity of women themselves.

Danyuan Jin’s definition of female film in feminism, Female Film or Female Consciousness -- Several Female Topics Involved in Current Chinese Films is the most favourable interpretation by the author so far. “Strictly speaking, women’s films are more important than just reflecting women’s lives, emotions and experiences. It’s to be able to take a woman’s position, or a woman’s point of view and really reflect what they think, what they’re struggling with confusion and conflict, struggle and compromise, their way of being, their anguish and hope, and should be reflected. Out of a specific era, special environment in a variety of women’s common needs, the most should be involved in their reality. The most sensitive and universal topics encountered in the situation, of course, also include women’s sexual consciousness. By contrast, women’s self-rescue and ‘soul touch’ and ‘spiritual dialogue’ in the real sense [3]. Danyuan Jin’s interpretation does not limit the gender of the creator, focuses on the situation and psychology of women in different periods, and reflects women’s struggles against male discourse, which is more accurate than the previous three definitions. Therefore, this study takes Danyuan Jin’s interpretation of women’s films as the conceptual scope of the research object, and analyses women’s films with clear female consciousness from the perspective of female standpoint and female psychology on the premise of not limiting the gender of creators.

Through reading and sorting out relevant literature, it is found that the study of anima in female-themed films mainly focuses on the works of a certain director or a certain film. It is difficult to find scholars to systematically generalize the female images. Most studies refer to the female images in specific directors or specific works.

Female images in films are often constructed as symbols of male desire, lacking their subjectivity. Reference of Freud’s psychoanalysis and Lacan developed on the basis of the structuralist psychoanalysis theory, Laura Mulvey in the “visual pleasure and narrative movie” [4], focusing on Hollywood classic film narrative strategy, scholar think the women in the Hollywood classic film have been materialized as the carrier of the male desire. Feminism and Chinese Women’s Film by Yuan Ying is relatively complete and comprehensive in introducing feminist theories [5]. By analysing the female characters created by the early female directors, combined with the background of The Times, it is actually the epitome of the male spirit at that time. Yajun Qu, in her article “Women are Pleasing to Others” -- Female Criticism on Male Films, examines the films of Yimou Zhang and Jin Xie from a feminist perspective and with feminist theory [6]. The author Yajun Qu believes that although these works that seem to write about women from women’s standpoint do get rid of the shackles of male centrism, these female characters

are seriously symbolized and regarded as the recipients of men's physical desires. In another article *Female Images in The Film Media in the 1990s* [7], Yajun Qu once again analysed the female characters in the films of Jin Xie and Yimou Zhang, believing that female characters are not only the "objects of desire" of men, but also the "subjects of desire" themselves [7].

From the literature review, it can be seen that the female images created in most female-themed films are still symbols of desire under male gaze, and they do not really take care of women's own situation and psychology from a female perspective. In addition, the research object of this paper, the director of *The Falls* is a man. Different from previous studies, director Monghong Chung pays more attention to the care for women in difficulties, as well as the psychological healing and growth of women. The purpose of this study is the attitudes and methods of contemporary filmmakers in making female-themed films and shaping female images, which will inspire film research and film creation. In addition, this research can help audiences and filmmakers pay more attention to the plight of women and their own growth, and give more power and hope to those who are living a difficult life, whether female or male. In order to achieve the expected purpose of this research, and make the significance of this research can be put into practice. This study will study the construction of female images in the Chinese female-themed film *The Falls* through text analysis.

3 Results

In the patriarchal cultural system, traditional film creators follow a fixed narrative mode, with men as the subject of creation having an absolute dominant position, while women as objects are in a subordinate and passive position. However, in the film *The Falls*, the director separated women from the patriarchal order, took women as the narrative subject, and deeply observed the inner world of women. Women experiencing the process of social dominant culture shape, and the women in film tend to represent the need to focus on a particular social group, with their look and the growing experience of women, the current situation of living environment and survival of the shaping of the family, society authority not only show the plight of female growth, more express the creator for deconstruction and subversion of the patriarchal society [8].

In *Stereotype and Equal Image of Character -- Female Image in Mass Media*, Lin Li summed up "three standards of gender equality: 1. Women should be subjects with independent personality dignity; 2. Female beauty varies from person to person, and can not be defined simply by a standard of tall and sexy; 3. The value of women lies in their creativity rather than visual pleasure [9]. On the one hand, the diversity of female images represents the awakening of their own cognition, on the other hand, it also represents the resistance to the female images inherent in the patriarchal society. The image of the broken mother and the independent daughter in the film *The Falls* interprets a kind of mother-daughter relationship with spirit exchange. The changes of the mother-daughter relationship in the film, no matter from good to bad or from bad to good, all focus on the heart of women in different stages and show the awakening and development of female consciousness from different angles.

4 Discussion

4.1 Mother's Fall

The most prominent female image in the film is that of the mother. Throughout the film history, the images of mothers are often selfless and bear humiliation. A mother can sacrifice herself for her family. These traditional mother images are named 'others' in the discourse of paternity, and contain the patriarchal cultural conspiracy that is exploited [10]. In essence, such a great mother is still the ideal product of a patriarchal society. The image of the broken elite mother in *The Falls* breaks the stereotype.

At the beginning of *The Falls*, the mother image is a professional woman with a professional attitude. The mother, Pin-Wen Luo, is an executive in a foreign company, has a decent, well-paid job and lives with her adolescent daughter in a very quiet, wealthy and safe apartment. A member of an elite class. Through the setting of Pin-Wen Luo's social identity and the decoration of costumes, props and makeup, the film creates a middle-class independent female image at the beginning. However, as the story progresses, Pin-Wen Luo's fragile and unbearable side gradually emerges after a series of pressures such as the epidemic, broken marriage and unemployment. Stray eyes, haggard face, fluctuating mood, these are the outward signs of her illness. Under the seemingly bright identity, in fact, Pin-Wen Luo suffered from a psychological disease called thought disorder. She often fantasizes about hearing the sound of *The Falls*. Just like the title of the film *The Falls*, the director alludes to Luo's falling state and mood.

The image of *The Falls* for the first time in the film, which was a rainstorm in the mother's fantasy, representing the mother's complete collapse. The storm wakened the sleeping mother at home and found her daughter Xiao Jing missing, so she went out in the rain to look for her daughter. But the storm was actually a mother's fantasy. It wasn't raining outside, and the daughter wasn't missing. Her daughter, who was asleep at home, received a call from the hospital saying her mother had been taken to hospital by police in an emotional state standing on the bridge. It was also the first time Jing realized that her mother might be ill. This fantasy of rain, to find the daughter as the beginning, the mother was completely defeated. After Pin-Wen Luo divorces with her husband, daughter Xiao Jing as the last member of this family, bearing the only sustenance on mother's emotion and the only existence relation that belongs to her, when mother thinks daughter is missing, her emotional world is destroyed completely. Luo's image of a previously independent woman was also washed away in the storm, and the mother's breakdown and fragile emotions poured out like a fall.

And the mother's earliest and greatest emotional blow is from the breakdown of marriage. One night before the heavy rain, the mother invited her ex-husband to visit her, saying she didn't know how to get along with her teenage daughter. The mother, already suffering from sensory disorders, fantasizes about her daughter's indifference to her and her ex-husband's return to the family. When the mother cried to her ex-husband, the mother tried to make some physical contact, but the ex-husband refused. In the mother's mood on the eve of the complete collapse, the director want to repair the foothold with her mother and her ex-husband marriage, as if to transmit a signal, and the gradual collapse of the mother's mood is like a pair of dominoes, and the fracture and the end of marriage is the first factor, tear down this pack outbreak, unemployment

behind these superposition factor, become its exponential growth source of pressure. The original source of the mother's emotional breakdown, at least on the surface, was her marriage.

The director does not avoid portraying Pin-Wen Luo 's old love for her ex-husband and his irresponsibility, and truly tells the emotional helplessness and fragility of women who have experienced marriage breakdown. On the one hand, her ex-husband in the absence of marriage and family, is Pin-Wen Luo emotional breakdown source, but also make the image of mother and wife in the film independent of man's value pursuit and film narrative, director in depicting injured, fragile, eager to her ex-husband female image on the home at the same time, the female is more strong texture and thickness of the emotional life. The director, on the other hand, offers a nuanced insight into the marital dilemmas of women's unique life experiences. Pin-Wen Luo seems to be a victim in marriage, but the director, from the perspective of women, integrates women's unique sensitivity and delicacy into the dramatic paragraphs with dramatic ups and downs, thus giving Pin-Wen Luo the initiative and right of speech.

4.2 The Transformation of Mother-Daughter Relationship

The mother-daughter relationship in female-themed films is generally divided into two forms: antagonistic and interdependent. The antagonistic mother-daughter relationship is usually focused on internal family conflicts, while the mother-daughter relationship is usually coping with external social conflicts, such as survival problems. In the film *The Falls*, as the mother's illness and life pressure gradually emerged, the relationship between mother and daughter underwent a transformation from antagonism to interdependence, which further enriched the image construction of mother and daughter.

The mother-daughter relationship shown at the beginning of the film is antagonistic. From the mother's perspective, the adolescent daughter is capricious and indifferent to herself. The daughter would come home and lock herself in her room, not interacting with her mother, and even humiliate her by scraping the word "bitch" off her dinner plate with leftover soup. But as the mother's illness appears, the daughter's indifference and capricious are actually the mother's fantasy. The daughter didn't use the word "bitch" to abuse her mother. The daughter came home and locked herself in her room because someone in class had COVID-19 and the daughter was worried about infecting her mother. From a mother's point of view, a mother's care for her daughter goes unrewarded. In the normal perspective, the image of the daughter is just a child being cared for, not so sweet. It shows that the opposite mother-daughter relationship only exists in the mother's fantasy, which is also an important symptom of the mother's illness.

The awakening of Xiao Jing's female consciousness contributed to the transformation of the mother-daughter relationship. In the film, an important turning point in the transformation of the mother-daughter relationship occurs after her mother is hospitalized for the first time, and the daughter realizes that she needs to take on the role of "caregiver", which also inspires Xiao Jing's awakening of female consciousness. After her mother's first hospitalization, her father took Xiao Jing to his new home, the family he formed with his now wife. When Xiao Jing walks into the spacious and bright house, she finds that her father's new family also has a brother she has never met. Her father's wife introduces a room behind a wall to Xiao Jing as her bedroom. Xiao Jing refused

her father's invitation and decided to return to her home. It is in this scene that Jing realizes that her father has completely left the original family and her mother who has been dreaming of repairing her marriage. So, with her daughter as the only link to her mother in this broken family, Jing needs unconditional support and comfort for her ailing mother to face reality. In the father's pale concern, small static completed the awakening of female consciousness and triggered the change of mother-daughter relations. Xiao Jing clearly realized that if women want to gain independent subjectivity, they cannot rely on the sympathy and pity of the patriarchal society for the weak status of women. They should have a clear understanding of their own situation, and always keenly realize and consciously maintain the dignity of women.

The spirit-swapping mother-daughter relationship makes the female characters in the film more self-conscious. In the interdependent mother-daughter relationship, Xiao Jing belongs to the role of "caregiver", Jing often wears a T-shirt emblazoned with the words "Don't Sweat it," showing that she has a calmness beyond her age. After her mother was diagnosed with a thinking disorder, Jing had to deal with a series of family problems on her own. Like a house fire, the financial stress of losing her mother's job, paying off my cleaning lady, and her own academic stress. Even the only complete dialogue with the father in the film is a dialogue on behalf of the mother and the family. The director portrays Xiao Jing as a patient, sensible and independent daughter, who can even deal with some social affairs on behalf of her mother and give emotional comfort and support to her sick mother. As life gradually returns to normal, Xiao Jing's independence and female consciousness are becoming stronger and stronger, and she is also helping her mother to embark on the path of female consciousness awakening. When the mother shows that she still has thoughts about her ex-husband, the daughter can truly understand her from her mother's standpoint and comfort her. Through gentle and patient dialogue and actions, the mother can completely give up her fantasy about her father. In fact, this also represents that the mother's budding female consciousness prompts her to give up her ex-husband. For a long time, male has always been regarded as the "primary sex" symbolizing order and authority, while female has always been regarded as the "secondary sex" in the tortuous and long gender struggle for sovereignty. In the film, the mother's self-awareness gradually becomes clear with her daughter's full understanding and care. When the mother and daughter were waiting in the checkout line at a convenience store, the middle-aged man in front of them deliberately delayed the checkout time because he was not satisfied with the goods, which caused the mother's strong dissatisfaction. The mother rushed forward to reason with the man, while the daughter also stood beside the mother to support her mother. After the matter was over, the daughter expressed to her mother that she liked what her mother had just done. The mother firmly expressed to her daughter, "She would endure it before, but now she won't." This clip is enough to show that the mother has a positive approval of her own behaviour. Under the long-term oppression of the patriarchal society, the director gives the female characters independent subject consciousness, and the female's sense of inappropriateness and resistance to life greatly reflects the awakening of female consciousness, and also creates a more powerful female image.

5 Conclusion

Female-themed films should really stand on the female standpoint to develop the story. From the perspective of women, Female-themed films should pay close attention to the interests of women. Only when women's awareness is strengthened will the plight of women be brought to the attention of more people. The "gentle" and "considerate" female images created in previous films are still objectified women from a male perspective and the carrier of male desire. However, the female image created by *The Falls* is female as the main body. Based on the mind-swapping mother-daughter relationship. It does not discuss men's fantasy and portrayal of female images. The film focuses on the relationship between mother and daughter. In the current patriarchal environment, the discussion on the mother-daughter relationship of "spiritual exchange" has been neglected in female-themed films, and *The Falls* is filling the gap. In the film, the daughter takes on the responsibility of caring for her mother as she confronts her mother's sensory disorder. In this mother-daughter relationship, the daughter plays the role of "mother". It was an expression of pure female emotion. At the same time, the previous films could not be divorced from men even though they were based on women's perspective. The typical male image of "playboy" is very common in daily life. The director portrays a morally flawed father, secretly expressing his inclination. The denunciation of "cheating men" is the embodiment of the awakening of female consciousness in the film. To some extent, the awakening of female consciousness can help shape the female images in the film. Whether sick mother or adolescent daughter, their sense of femininity is sharpened time and time again. As a result, the mother and daughter in the film, whose spirit is exchanged, rely on each other in difficulties. On the one hand, the mother's self-consciousness is awakened, and on the other hand, the daughter's independence and responsibility are taught. The female images of the mother and daughter become more realistic and self-conscious as the film progresses. In addition, the construction of female images in the film is based on the female perspective, and the real expression of women's thoughts and feelings on the basis of realism will also stimulate the female consciousness of the audience. Therefore, when portraying female images, film workers should adopt the perspective of gender equality and give female characters independent subject consciousness. Female images should not be bent to meet men's eyes and preferences but should be constructed from the growth and perception of women themselves.

References

1. Ying, Y. L. (2005). *A history of women's films*. In Shanghai Translation Publishing House.
2. Xiao, L. (1993). What is Women's Film, *Movie World*.
3. Jin, D. Y., & Cao, Q. (2007). Several Female Topics involved in Current Chinese Films, *Social Science*.
4. Mulvey, L. (1995). *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*. Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House.
5. Ying, Y. (1990). *Feminism and Chinese women's cinema*. *Contemporary Cinema*.
6. Qu, Y. J. (1994). *Women for their own pleasure -- female criticism of male films*. *Contemporary Cinema*.
7. Qu, Y. J. (1998). *Female Images in Film in the 1990s*. *Contemporary Cinema*.

8. Tian, S. (2019). *An analysis of the growth narrative of Chinese female films*. Jiangxi: Media Forum.
9. Li, L. (2001). *Stereotype and Equal Image of Character -- Female image in Mass Media*. Chinese Female culture.
10. He, J. M. (2010). Mother image and the construction of gender culture in new China -- from the perspective of literary sociology. *Zhejiang: Journal of Shaoxing University of Arts and Sciences*.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

