



New Image of Chinese Women on the Screen-Based on the Film *Sunny Sister*

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Abstract. Under the influence of the MeToo feminist movement, the Chinese film industry has also begun to produce films with feminist themes. *Sunny Sisters* is a film produced by Chinese male director Bao Beier in 2021. This is a film about the friendship of seven girls. Therefore, this paper will explore whether the image of the female character in *Sunny Sister* has been influenced by a wave of feminism. *Sunny Sister* has fundamentally changed the way in which the male director shot women and his ideology. This paper will analyze the image of the female character in *Sunny Sister* based on Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and the semiotics of film. Through the image of women in the film, it is concluded that the filming of women by male directors has changed under the influence of the feminist movement. Despite their feminist overtones, these images of women are still the product of a patriarchal ideology.

Keywords: *Sunny Sister* · Male gaze · feminism · Chinese women · patriarchy

1 Introduction

The Opium Wars is a starting point of Chinese cinema. As a result of the Opium War, China started to trade with western countries. The emergence of Chinese cinema was in the 1890s. Chinese cinema produces many experimental films between the 1890s and 1920s, such as operas and sketches. Meanwhile, the trade between China and western countries contributed to the spread of western ideology in China in the late nineteenth century. The concept of feminism enlightens many Chinese people that includes many Chinese ideologists and the young generation. A Chinese famous politician and ideologist Qichao Liang appeals that Chinese women need to have the same rights as a man in education, job, and politics. At the same time, the change in social ideology prompts lots of themes of feminism in Chinese cinema. *Lee Fee-Fee the Heroing* (1925) is the Chinese first martial film that has a complete storyline, and also represents the Chinese earliest ideology of feminism that appeared on the screen. However, before the twenty centuries, the ideology of Chinese society is that women are the accessories of men, women need to obedience to men, and women believe that the status of men should be higher than women. Under the influence of Western ideology, Chinese male directors produce many films about feminism, such as *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple*

(1928) and *The Red Errant Knight* (1929). In the twenty centuries, more and more Chinese women join in the arm with men, which prompts women to have a sense of striving for their rights. Under this situation, although some women's ideology of feminism has raised, it still has a large part of women are still shackled by masculism and defended the rules of patriarchal society. The solidified ideology of Chinese patriarchal society also indirectly influences the film industry's development. After the martial film, Chinese film industries start to produce other genres of films about women, such as feature films *White Snake* (1926), *Sing-Song Girl Red Peony* (1931), and *The Goddess* (1934). The female image in these films is a single that suffers and accepts oppression from a man in their life and has miserable destiny and life on screen, which creates stereotypes of women. With the development of technology and transmission of information, MeToo Movement as a contemporary feminism movement event launched in the United States also influences Chinese people and society. The re-emergence of the concept of feminism has widely swept through Chinese society and media industries, which becomes a new Chinese feminism movement wave. The topic of feminism has become a topic that has been widely discussed and focused on social media in recent years. The discussion on social media about feminism has also triggered the Chinese film industry. The Chinese film industry has gradually released a series of films about feminism, such as *Send Me to The Clouds* (2019), *Hi, Mom* (2021) and *Sunny Sisters* (2021).

This paper will analyze the female images of film *Sunny Sister* to reveal Chinese male directors' gaze about the image of female blends masculism and feminism based on Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory. Meanwhile, the image of females in the film indirectly explains whether independent women or women who depend on a man's life is unfortunate and creates a patriarchal trap for women who want to liberate from the bondage of marriage and women who are celibatarian. This paper is divided into four parts. Firstly, it outlines the film content of the film *Sunny Sister*. Then, Semiotics theory of film and Male Gaze theory are introduced. Next, the image of women in the film is analyzed through the two theories. Finally, conclusions are drawn from the analysis of the portrayal of women.

2 Sunny Sisters

Sunny Sisters is a film that shoots by a Chinese male director Beier Bao in 2021. This film is revised to the Korean version of *Sunny* (2011), which tells seven girls to become good friends in high school, but one of them was injured which makes them separated. After twenty-five years, Lijun Zhang who has become a housewife is reunited in hospital with her best friend Qing Lin. Qing Lin has suffered a serious illness. Before Qing Lin died, she hopes to reunite with their sisters on that day before she dies. Thus, Lijun Zhang starts to journey to find their sisters. In the process, she finds that in the twenty-five years since their separation, everyone's life has dramatic changes. *Sunny Sister* as a film produced under the influence of MeToo movement had a significant impact on the image of Chinese females and the relationship in women created by Chinese male directors.

3 Male Gaze

3.1 Semiotics of Film

Christian Metz claims that cinema is based on the literal meaning of the spectacle reproduced in the image and sound [1]. The trope, composition, framing, storyline, camera movement, light, and sound effects determine what the film conveys. Also, Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins mention that photography is a tool that controllers can project their ideology to self-reflection and surveillance themselves [2]. The director as a controller of the film is not only expressed their inner side on screen but also reviews their ideology from the audience's perspective.

3.2 Male Gaze

British theorist Laura Mulvey analyzes the patriarchal ideology of film based on the semiotics of film and proposed male gaze theory in her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. The male gaze is female as an erotic and sexual manner to be looked by males.

To be looked by males includes three perspectives: the man behind the camera, the male characters in the film, and the male audiences. The male gaze refers to the man who behind the camera highlight onscreen women's stars in an erotic or sexual way. The male gaze also refers to that the look of the male character who watches the erotic female object. Besides, the male gaze refers to male audiences who is enjoying watching their ego ideal watch a beautiful woman on screen. The three perspectives male gaze contain two different ways that are voyeuristic and fetishistic. Voyeuristic is particularly looking at an erotic object who is powerless to look back. Also, fetishistic male spectator projects themselves onto the hero onscreen. During the process, men empower the power and subjective initiative, but women are passive, which only pleases males.

4 The Image of the Female in *Sunny Sister*

The image of female characters in *Sunny Sister* embodies the concept of chauvinism and feminism. The director portrays seven different female characters- Qing Lin, Lijun Zhang, Xiaojuan Huang, Mei Yang, Yuhong Qiu, Zhu Zhu, and Youran Li. *Sunny Sister* includes two timelines: childhood and adulthood. Each female character has two images. The different images of women in different periods represent the director's ideology of how women were portrayed in different ages.

4.1 Childhood

4.1.1 Male Gaze

Lijun Zhang is the protagonist of the film; she is timid, not smart and has low self-esteem. At the beginning of the film, she introduces herself to the class. When the teacher asks her about her specialty, she thinks her specialty is long teeth, which is laughed at by her classmates. Lijun misinterprets this laughter as a sign of having no friends. In addition,

she has two braids and two cute pink hairbands on her head. She is also wearing red backpacks. Based on Chinese culture, only children have two braids and wear strappy trousers. Lijun's two braids, pink hair bands and red strappy trousers mean that she is young and weak.

In contrast to Lijun, Zhu Zhu and Mei Yang are portrayed in a similar way to her. Zhu Zhu is an outgoing girl who is not interested in learning. Her hair is similar to Liu Jun's, tied in two braids with a pink hairband and wearing a cartoonish T-shirt. The crooked double eyelid patches on her eyes, the way she sleeps in class and the way she gobbles up her food all indirectly scandalise the image of femininity. Meanwhile, Mei Yang is a nerdy and quiet girl. Wearing red eyeglass, a yellow shirt and the way she wears implies she is a traditional person. However, the colour of her clothes also hints at her youth and vitality. She is immersed in martial arts or romance novels and is unable to distinguish between reality and fantasy.

By contrast, Xiaojuan Huang is also a girl who is outgoing and loving beauty. The pink bow hairpin she wears and the bangs on her forehead show her tender and soft side. But her outgoing personality and her low-necked half-sleeves imply that she is both outgoing and mature.

Yuhong Qiu is also a not smart, beauty-loving girl. She had big wavy curly hair. Although perms are forbidden at school, she thinks that by covering her hair with her school uniform she can go undetected. Meanwhile, the director used yellow lighting effects in the scene where she greets Zhang Linjun will catch her walking and rubbing her hair, highlighting her sexy side. Yuhong Qiu's low-necked half-sleeves and the director's filming of Lijun Zhang set them up as lovely, sexy, naive women. Laura Mulvey mentions that women are attractive and seductive to the male camera, showing the male fascination with the female form, making women safe objects of beauty rather than threatening [3]. The images portrayed by these five female characters under the male gaze are naive and sexy.

4.1.2 Feminism

However, the image of Qing Lin and Youran Li breaks the rules of female eroticism and sexuality on screen. Qing Lin as the leader of the Sunshine Sisters is outgoing, brave and understanding. She has short hair and wears a black watch. The image of her sharp, short hair breaks the sexy side of femininity in front of the camera. Although Xiaojuan Huang also has short hair, Qing Lin's short hair without bangs accentuates her sharpness and potential danger more than safety. Meanwhile, jewelry is a feminine possession while watches represent a masculine one on screen. When jewelry is worn on a woman, the colour of the jewelry accentuates the sensuality of the woman. Conversely, the raw lines, style and colour of the watch make the man more masculine. Thus, the black watch on Qing Lin's hand breaks the stereotype of women on screen, which highlights women also can be masculine. In addition, her collar is pulled up when she is wearing the same school uniform as everyone else. The high collar of the jacket reduces the exposure of skin. The high collar reinforces the fact that she has more strength than the others, as opposed to the bare skin of the others. She wears trousers throughout the play and the colours of her clothes are all earth tone, such as green, yellow and blue. The earth tone also breaks the image of women wearing only brightly coloured clothes onscreen. At

the same time, the earthy colours accentuate her masculinity. In contrast, Youran Li's is portrayed as a pretty, slim, and silent girl. According to the research, Chinese males' preferences for lighter skin tones skin women, because the skin colour can provide cues concerning female age [4]. Thus, Youran Li's characterization suits to the Chinese male preference for the female characters and also represents the female characters under the Chinese male gaze. Compared to the Western male gaze of women, the Chinese male gaze of women has more of an innocent and youthful character.

Therefore, all seven female characters in the film, excluding Qing Lin, are characterized by innocence and youthfulness. Although the Western male gaze is different from the Chinese male gaze, the female figures are all weak and safe under the male gaze. However, Youran Li's character and personality completely break with the male gaze of femininity. She is a cold and bad temper person. As result, there is a fierceness in her eyes and behaviour, as opposed to the harmless female gaze of the male gaze. In a scene that Lijun Zhang first meets her, the director uses close-up and adds yellow lighting effects to shoot Youran Li to emphasise her beauty and fair skin. However, Youran Li says indifferently to Lijun Zhang and walks away. In this scene, Lijun Zhang's perspective is projected by the director's perspective and male audience, which suits fetishistic concept referred to the male gaze concept. However, the difference is that male character is replaced by a female character. In this process, Youran Li is a character who is looked at. However, the line 'go away' is a rejection and resistance when the female character is the one being looked at. Thus, in this process, women are not being watched and used to please men.

4.2 Adulthood

4.2.1 Male Gaze

Apart from Qing Lin, the other six girls have all entered into marriage. In contrast to their childhood, the director has used cooler lighting to capture their adult years. The dependence with males is also seen from how their grown-up versions have to survive having a busy husband, getting heartbreaks, betrayals, divorces, and having trust issues to begin a relationship [5].

As an adult, Lijun Zhang works as a housewife. However, she is neglected by her husband and disliked by her children in her family life. The change of status transforms her from a silly and innocent girl to a silent wife. The colour palette of the clothes she wears changes from the previous warm tones to cooler ones, such as white, beige and dark blue. The colours of her clothes suggest a lack of vitality and a gradual loss of self. At the same time, Lijun Zhang's home features cold-toned furniture and backgrounds, which suggest that her home is a prison. Although she can have the time to enjoy her life, her life is still cold against the cold tones. In the scene where Xiaojuan Huang asks her about her sex life, her answer is negative while her response is evasive. Lijun Zhang's response indirectly reflects the male director's oppression of women expressing their sexuality and sexuality on screen. The female voice is excluded and at the same time confined to the body, thus reducing the female voice to silence in mainstream cinema. Mei Yang, who is also a housewife, and Lijun Zhang have completely different lives.

In contrast to Lijun Zhang, who relies on her husband for an affluent life, Mei Yang's living conditions are dire. Compared to her student days, she still wears a pair of red

glasses. The red glasses imply that Mei Yang is the same as before. She expects a romantic love and a handsome another half. Although she has fulfilled her wishes as a student, the director highlights the hardships of caring for her children alone and finding a job, as well as her husband who is addicted to playing games. Thus, by comparing Mei Yang's life with Lijun Zhang's, the director indirectly objectifies women, suggesting the importance of marrying a rich man rather than pursuing the life one wants.

However, as an adult, Xiaojuan Huang perfectly fits the role of a woman under the male gaze and objectifies her. Xiaojuan wears red lipstick and a sexy dress. Her sexy dress highlights her breasts. At the same time, her hands and head are covered in jewelry accessories such as earrings, necklaces, and hairpins. In the scene where Zhu Zhu asks if her whole breasts did not keep your husband, this indirectly shows that Xiaojuan Huang's breasts have been changed to please her husband. At the same time, this reveals that in gender relationships, women lose control of their own bodies, and this right is in the hands of men. The woman is also the one who is oppressed. In addition to this, even though she finds out that her husband cheated on her, his husband by giving her material satisfaction, she chooses to eventually forgive him. This further highlights the characteristic that women are objectified.

Unlike Mei Yang, Lijun Zhang and Xiaojuan Huan, Yuhong Qiu and Zhu Zhu are portrayed as scandalised by men. Compared to Zhu Zhu of her student days, Zhu Zhu who enters society and marriage does not change in her essential image. She is still a silly girl who loves to eat. Her bangs and her hilarious behaviour at work reveal that despite her marriage, she is still as ignorant and not smart as ever.

In contrast to Zhu Zhu, Yuhong Qiu is not only portrayed as scandalised, but also objectified. She is a tragic character. She did not go to university; her family's downfall and the departure of her husband led her to a life of crime. The sexy black dress she wears. This black dress highlights her legs and breasts.

Thus, the female body under the male gaze is content with its visual pleasure. This visual pleasure allows for the persecution of women on screen. At the same time, it reinforces the popular stereotype that uneducated women can only have a good life if they rely on money, and indirectly associates women with money.

4.2.2 Feminism and Patriarchy

The character of Lin Qing is different from other female characters. She is an independent woman who is not married and not dependent on men, but at the same time, she is alone and has only two months to live. The characterization of Lin Qing indirectly shows that the end of independent women is tragic. Before she dies, she leaves her inheritance to her sisters to help them settle for a better life. The women help each other to free themselves from the shackles they carry. At the same time, the women helping each other reveals that women need to sacrifice themselves to achieve their own or collective success. The women in the film are therefore portrayed on screen as oppressed, whether they enter marriage or become independent.

5 The Reasons for the Gemale Image on Screen

In contrast to the image of adult women and women as students, the portrayal of student women by Chinese male directors is either a visual treatment for men or a scandalization and degradation of women's status [6]. At the same time, the portrayal of adult women also involves the oppression of their family life by the male director. The gender division of labour in the family, as well as the political and economic gains for women, influence the position of women in the family [7]. Under the influence of a patriarchal society, women's own abilities are neglected in favour of less meaningful work that relegates them to the status of caged ornamental birds, thus becoming exhibits in their husbands' exhibitions [8]. It is also because of the gendered division of labour within the family and the suppression of women's political and economic incomes by men in a patriarchal society that the role of Chinese women on screen is restricted to the family (as wives and mothers). As a result, women on screen are restricted in their ability to develop their rational skills and thus lose themselves. Although under the influence of the feminist movement, women on screen are no longer portrayed as wives and mothers in the home, but as single mothers, there is still a conflict between independence, freedom and motherhood [9]. Although the single mother is free from male bondage to women, her life is still miserable and unfortunate. But as a woman who has not entered marriage, she is emotionally absent. Thus, although the images of women by Chinese male directors are feminist in nature, the images of women in either case are formed by the combination of the male director's gaze and the oppressive ideology of male power. Thus, in a patriarchal society, the suppression of their rational faculties by men or the suppression of their emotional aspects prevents women from becoming fully human [10].

6 Conclusion

Based on an analysis of the portrayal of women in *Sunny Sister*, Chinese male directors have become more diverse in their portrayal of women following the influence of the feminist wave. This includes women who are dependent on their husbands, single mothers and women who have not entered marriage and love. Although these women are no longer simply dependent on men or subservient to them. But the woman is still not free from the constraints of family and money. Besides, independent women are defined as workaholics who lack emotion. The absence of affection and love in them leads them to aspire to have a family. As a result, these images of Chinese women, whether they are entering marriage, independent women, or single mothers, remain incomplete under the lens of the Chinese male director. As a result, women are still objectified by the Chinese male director's camera, thus creating a stereotype of the female figure. This invariably limits the development of women in reality and suggests that the life of women entering marriage is miserable. Women can only have a prosperous life if they put up with or pleasure men. Although an independent woman has the same rights as a man or is free from male bondage, she ends up alone and miserable. At the same time, these male directors' images of women can lead to the objectification of women themselves. The author thinks this kind of work is a bad influence on the public and society. In the future, films with a female theme could firstly change the characterization of women in films,

and at the same time, directors could create a new way of filming women by breaking the stereotypes of women in front of the camera through props, shots and lighting. The new way of filming will show that women have the same rights as men, thus further changing the status quo of the Chinese film industry.

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