



Analysis of the Portrayal of Female Characters in Chinese Science Fiction Films from the Feminist Perspective

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Abstract. With the films *The Wandering Earth* and *The Wandering Earth 2* achieving both box office and reputation success, Chinese science fiction films are rising after a trial and development phase. Studies on Chinese science fiction films have also gained importance. However, there are gaps in the current research both in terms of the feminist perspective and the scope of the films analyzed. This paper briefly composed the history of Chinese science fiction films and selected nine representative films for analysis, and focused on the characterization and narrative function of female characters in those films. The problems of Chinese science fiction films in the portrayal of female characters are summarized. The study found that most female characters in Chinese science fiction films are male foils. In terms of characterization, female characters are based on traditional perceptions and stereotypical prejudices. Regarding narrative function, the ratio of male to female characters is disproportionate, and female characters are functional and marginalized. Chinese science fiction films lack the ability to portray female characters that fit the feminist perspective. It is also clear from this overall lack that the way Chinese science fiction films portray women has developed over time, showing a tendency to be free from the shackles of the male perspective.

Keywords: Chinese science fiction films, feminism, female characters.

1 Introduction

Cinema is an ideology in which positions, ideas and ways of behaving are inevitably reflected^[1]. Science fiction films, as a special branch of cinema, are also closely related to reality, which aims not only to construct a narrative of interest but also to express anxiety about reality and to think seriously about real politics^[2]. Science fiction films have always been seismometers of the social, political and economic situation^[3]. The films' reflections on real-life issues cannot be ignored when researching science fiction films. Due to the late start and immaturity of filming technology, Chinese science fiction films have been performing poorly for a long time. The quantity and quality of them are hardly comparable to foreign science fiction films. Little research has been

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conducted on Chinese science fiction films as well. After the success of *The Wandering Earth* series, Chinese science fiction films have come back into the viewers' eyes. The study of them has also gradually attracted the attention of scholars.

At present, the research conducted on Chinese science fiction films is inadequate in two aspects. The first is the thematic gap. The analysis of science fiction films often focuses on the shown level of technology. The social issues implied in them, such as gender and class, are less often mentioned, which is especially true for the studies of Chinese science fiction films. Since the majority of the films' audiences are male, the vast majority of Chinese science fiction films are in a male context. Few studies have analyzed Chinese science fiction films from the feminist perspective. The second is the singularity of the research object. Most existing studies on Chinese science fiction films focus on summarizing the history and analyzing the development status. The only studies on specific films mostly focused on *The Wandering Earth* [4]. The existing studies have provided a complete feminist analysis of *The Wandering Earth*. But their results cannot reflect the changes in feminism in the development of Chinese science fiction films. This paper will analyze more Chinese science fiction films chronologically to explore the change.

Two questions will be studied in this paper. The first is how Chinese science fiction films portray female characters. Second, it will examine whether the portrayal of female characters in Chinese science fiction films has evolved. The study will first briefly review the development history of Chinese science fiction films and select a few representative films. The selected films will be subjected to textual analysis, focusing on the characterization and narrative function of the female characters. The problems of Chinese science fiction films in portraying female characters will be raised in the summary of this study.

2 The Development of Chinese Science Fiction Films

The film *Artificial Sun (Xiao Tai Yang)* in 1953 was the earliest Chinese science fiction film, a science education film for children. From 1953 to 1978, before the reform and opening up, was the first stage of Chinese science fiction films. At this stage, Chinese science fiction films were still in their early beginnings and had many flaws. Influenced by the special historical background, the works of this period had a more obvious political complexion. The second stage of Chinese science fiction films is from 1978, after the reform and opening up, to 2019, before *The Wandering Earth*. Many foreign science fiction films were introduced during this period, forming a certain size of science fiction audience. With the promotion, Chinese science fiction films made a breakthrough in the subject matter. The development of Chinese science fiction films in this period gradually turned into a low period after a small peak. Although the number of Chinese science fiction films has gradually increased in the new century, they have failed to make any breakthrough in subject matter and quality [5]. In 2019, Chinese science fiction films entered a new era with *The Wandering Earth*. The mature filmmaking techniques and the Chinese storytelling core demonstrated in *The Wandering Earth* have propelled Chinese science fiction films back into the audience's view. *The Wandering*

Earth 2 further solidified this success, garnering both the box office and reputation. Chinese science fiction films have found their development direction and entered a rising stage.

3 Female Characterization in Chinese Science Fiction Films

This paper selected the five Chinese science fiction movies with the highest audience ratings on Douban (Table 1).

Table 1. The five movies with highest audience ratings.

Title	Rating
<i>The Wandering Earth 2</i>	8.4/10
<i>Dislocation</i>	8.1/10
<i>The Wandering Earth</i>	7.9/10
<i>The Ozone Layer Vanishes</i>	7.8/10
<i>Wonder Boy</i>	7.7/10

Four other films have been selected based on the representation and innovation of the subject matter: *Artificial Sun*, *Ballad of the Ming Tombs Reservoir*, *Death Ray on Coral Island* and *CJ7*. This paper will analyze the selected movies in chronological order.

3.1 Stage One

3.1.1 Artificial Sun (1953)

The film tells the story of a group of children who want to solve the problem of cold winters in the north. With the help of scientists, they use a rocket to raise the artificial sun into the universe. The film is short and does not portray the characters individually. The characters even have no names. The main female character in the film is a girl among the children.

In terms of characterization, the girl has no individually outstanding qualities other than the imagination and creativity that all children have. In terms of narrative function, the girl does not have a separate storyline in the film and is always a part of these children.

The film shows some gender stereotypes. At the beginning of the discussion, the girl proposes an approach that is an evasion of the problem and is rebuked by others. In the lab, the girl is the first to violate the rule and question the scientist's research. When answering the scientist's question, the boys immediately refute the girl's incorrect answer. Not only do the boys come up with ideas to solve the problem, but it is also two boys who carry out the space mission. These show that boys are better than girls in the knowledge base, creativity and execution. As an early Chinese science fiction film, this film is clearly a science education film aimed at kid audiences. Most characters, especially female characters, follow traditional gender perceptions.

3.1.2 Ballad of the Ming Tombs Reservoir (1958).

The film tells the story of two periods, during the construction of the Ming Tombs Reservoir and twenty years after its completion. The film has obvious political propaganda overtones and is a literary work born in a special period. The film has three main female characters: Zhou Jing, Sun Guifang, and Yang. Because the two parts of the film are very different, they are treated separately in the analysis.

In the first part of the film, all three female characters are dressed unisex, with short hair and strong bodies. They are involved in physical labor together with men. The film has less portrayal of individual characters. Their hard work and other good qualities also belong to all the workers. In terms of narrative function, the story is told through the perspective of the visiting group, with each of the three female characters taking on a storyline outside of the main one. It is worth paying attention to the storyline of Sun Guifang and Yang. Sun Guifang first thinks she can not do the complex technical work. With the help of another driver, she also becomes a tractor driver and achieves technical innovation. Sun Guifang's ex-boyfriend Hu Jintang is a writer who thinks Sun's farmer status is not good enough for him, so he breaks up with her and falls in love with Yang, a college student from the city. After being refused, Hu tries to make up with Sun again. At Sun's home, Sun Guifang and Yang break down Hu Jintang's lies and drive him away. The film uses the case of Chen Shimei to show the relationship between Sun, Zhou and Yang. But the very different endings of the two stories reflect the progressive view of women's marriage at that time. Women are no longer appendages of men in the marriage and take the initiative of their own destinies.

In the second part of the film, twenty years after the reservoir's completion, Zhou Jing becomes the head of the local commune, and Sun Guifang's daughter becomes the youngest scientist at that time. Both images are progressive. But the film puts the focus of this section on a party between several men led by Zhou's husband. Zhou's husband laughs and talks with his friends while Zhou Jing keeps serving them food and drinks. This still follows the traditional gender perception that women should be responsible for household tasks. It reflects that feminist progress at the time was only at the level of work and lacked changes in daily life.

3.2 Stage Two

3.2.1 Death Ray on Coral Island (1980)

The film tells the story of a scientist, Chen Tianhong, who risks his life to protect the scientific achievements of his father-in-law, Zhao Qian, by fighting against an evil businessman. Finally, with the help of Zhao's old friend, Ma Tai, he foils the businessman's plan. There is only one major female character in the film, Mona, who is the daughter of Zhao and the fiancée of Chen.

In terms of characterization, Mona also serves in the lab and is a rare image of a female scientist. But she is barely portrayed in this image, only as a background in the lab. After her father dies, she cannot protect the results of his experiments. Instead, her fiancé, Chen Tianhong, is determined to take the risk of taking the results away. Before Chen leaves, the other assistants say they will take care of Mona and let him leave

without worry. This shows that Mona is not only not a comrade who can take risks together, but instead is a liability that delays the hero's mission.

In terms of narrative function, Mona is completely outside the main storyline. The narrative in the first half of the film centers on Zhao, at which point Mona is just a background character in the lab. In the adventure of Chen, Mona even disappears completely, only to show up at the end of the story. Mona's role in the film is simply as a foil, used to enrich the background stories of Zhao and Chen and as a tool to rescue Chen at the end. If this role were removed, it would not affect the film. There is only one major female character in the film, and it is far less well-portrayed than the male characters. The core of the film is a story that men solving a crisis. Women are just a liability and eye candy in the adventure.

3.2.2 Dislocation (1986)

This film narrates the tale of Zhao Shuxin, an engineer, who creates an intelligent robot to act as his surrogate at social gatherings but ultimately faces a rebellion from the very creation. There are two female characters in the film: Zhao Shuxin's girlfriend, Yang Lijuan, and his secretary. Both of them are completely lacking in personal portrayal in the film. They represent Zhao Shuxin's life and work respectively. Their role is to serve as a foil to Zhao from different aspects. The secretary has no sense of autonomy. Her every appearance is Zhao's accompaniment at work, and her function is only to convey to him the work to be done. Although Yang has her own emotions, her more important role is to sharpen the contradiction between Zhao and the robot. Her four appearances make things gradually worse. The female characters in the film are either assistants at work or the reason for making men fight, acting as carriers of male sexual desire.

3.2.3 Wonder Boy (1988)

The film tells the story of Liu Beibei, a boy born with electricity, who encounters a series of changes due to his special physique and is eventually able to live a normal life. The film has three main female characters: Beibei's classmates Jinfeng and Weiwei, and Beibei's mother, Xue Shuying.

In terms of characterization, Jinfeng is confident and spirited, loving to be in the limelight. She often clashes with Beibei and is a representative of the peers who exclude him. Weiwei has a kind and compassionate personality. She was Beibei's earliest friend and the first person to be told his secret. She strictly kept his secret, even after being mistakenly injured to a coma by Beibei. Xue Shuying is one of the few adult women in the film. She also takes good care of her family while working. Although sometimes gets angry with Beibei, Xue is usually a considerate mother.

In terms of narrative function, all three female characters carry part of the role of advancing the story. Jinfeng's misunderstanding, Weiwei's kindness and Xue's education, from different aspects, make Beibei realize that he does not want the ability with electricity, leading to the film's climax. Women are involved in the main narrative as a hindrance or aid. The center of the film remains male characters.

The film also shows the problems faced by women in the family. Although Xue Shuying has her own job, she is still responsible for household tasks, facing double pressure from work and family. Her husband does not only not help her share the household tasks but also cannot understand her hard work, only considering it as her duty. This reflects a negative result of China's early approach to promoting gender equality. Chinese women are required to be employed while bearing the burden of reproducing and caring for their families. The nominal improvement in the treatment of women has brought even more serious inequities ^[6].

3.2.4 The Ozone Layer Vanishes (1990)

The film tells the story of a boy who is accidentally able to understand the language of animals and goes on an adventure to eliminate the hole in the atmosphere. The main female character is a robber the boy meets on the road.

The female robber is portrayed in the film in a contradictory way. On the one hand, she is selfish and pessimistic, letting the driver die to keep him from turning her in and planning to leave the pollution behind. On the other hand, she is also kind and wise. She helps the boy save his cat and confronts the driver with a gun to stop him from poaching. With the boy's persuasion, she stops her escape and plans to blow up the source of pollution. After the plan fails, she sacrifices her life to save the boy. Overall, the female robber is a misguided, selfish but still good-hearted person.

In terms of narrative function, although the female robber is throughout the story, her role is always passive and negative. When facing choices, the first choice of female robbers is often to escape, and making these choices has led or will lead to more serious consequences.

The female robber is also portrayed as a seductive but mysterious and unpredictable woman who carries a threat ^[7]. The tanker that leaked toxic gas makes an emergency stop because of a robbery. The robbery is committed by the female robber's boyfriend who wanted to satisfy her desire for money. In summary, the female robber is the cause of the crisis of the atmospheric hole. The film portrays the female robber as a devil, reflecting the criticism and suppression of women's desires from the male perspective. The faults committed by men are put on women, and the image of women is distorted and demonized.

3.2.5 CJ7 (2007)

The film tells the story of a young boy Zhou Xiaodi, who lost his mother at a young age and is ostracized by his classmates because of poverty. After getting an alien dog CJ7 by chance, the conflict between Zhou and his classmates is resolved. But Zhou's father dies in an accident. CJ7 uses all its power to revive Zhou's father, turning him into a doll. The only main female character in the film is Zhou's teacher, Ms. Yuan.

In terms of characterization, Ms. Yuan is a kind and gentle teacher who cares about all her students. Ms. Yuan does not care about the family background when she treats them. She is the closest person to Zhou besides his father. It is worth noting that Ms. Yuan has a double identity of a teacher and mother. In the bereaved family of Zhou, Ms. Yuan fills the role of mother.

In terms of narrative function, the character of Ms. Yuan is completely functional. She lacks self-awareness, and her appearance is accompanied by the resolution of Zhou's conflicts with others. She always appears at the next moment when the conflict erupts and acts as a mediator. After all the conflicts are finally resolved, Mr. Yuan loses her role and is completely removed from the main story. In the end, Ms. Yuan becomes a total eye-candy character in the film. The film's portrayal of her is completely flat, and this character has no change or growth. Her double identity as a teacher and a mother predestines her to be a mere embodiment of devotion, completely lacking in self-awareness. It also reflects the traditional perception of the mother's role that her entire value lies in her selfless devotion to her family.

3.3 Stage Three

3.3.1 The Wandering Earth (2019)

The film tells the story of astronaut Liu Peiqiang and his son Liu Qi, who overcame difficulties to save the Earth while resolving the conflict between them during a crisis of Earth's destruction. The film has two main female characters: Han Duoduo and Zhou Qian.

Han Duoduo is an orphan that Liu Qi's grandfather rescued after the Earth stopped rotating. She inherits the name of Liu Qi's deceased mother and is the only female in the family. She is a problematic student who disobeys her teacher and is determined to visit the surface. After leaving the shelter, she was always the weaker member of the adventuring team, needing others to protect her in the crisis. Zhou Qian is the only adult female on the rescue team. Unlike the male members, who are equipped with heavy weapons, she carries medical equipment. The image she presents in conflict with the captain's opinion is emotional and unconcerned with the bigger picture. Both their images reflect a stereotypical bias against women.

In terms of narrative function, the female characters in this film remain functional and marginalized. As one of the protagonists of the film, Han Duoduo is always passive in the main narrative. She neither reveals the theme nor serves as someone's emotional support; even her name is taken from someone else^[8]. Although her final speech serves a purpose, it elevates the character to advance the story. Han's lack of character growth makes her act like a tool. Zhou Qian is also in the main narrative, but she takes on even less of the plot than Han. Without character growth, she is always a foil to the male characters. Her conflict with Captain Wang Lei is to shape Wang's image. In the subsequent rescue operation, the tasks performed by Zhou are just auxiliary. Their role shows the exhortation of male society to women: women should neither do nothing because they are weak nor act beyond the tolerance of men's self-esteem. They should shape themselves in accordance with the needs of male society. They also should be submissive but not weak, tenacious to survive and devote themselves selflessly^[9].

The film also has elements of the male gaze, such as the bunny girl. These are unrelated to the story, which is pandering to the needs of men. The film is an epic about saving the Earth and a story about the conflict between father and son. The female characters are outside this core and only play an enriching and filling role in the story.

Despite the progress made in Chinese science fiction films with the inclusion of Han Duoduo and Zhou Qian as primary characters, there remains an undeniable inadequacy in the portrayal of female characters in *The Wandering Earth*, as it still adheres to traditional gender stereotypes. Men are depicted as adventurous, intelligent, and willing to sacrifice, serving as dominant rulers and leaders. On the other hand, women are portrayed as nurturing, kind, fragile, and obedient, embodying maternal qualities ^[10].

3.3.2 *The Wandering Earth 2* (2023)

This film has the background of the previous film, which tells the story of the two crises that occurred on Earth during the twenty-one years between the Moving Mountain Project and the Wandering Earth Project. The film also tells the story of Liu Peiqiang, Tu Hengyu, Hao Xiaoxi and other people who grow up during the crisis. The main female characters in the film are Han Duoduo and Hao Xiaoxi.

Han Duoduo's portrayal in the film can be divided into two parts. She is a skilled and determined aerospace trainee in the first period. She is the first to subdue troublemakers in unexpected incidents and outperforms the male protagonist Liu Peiqiang in training. When the space elevator was attacked, she made a decisive contribution to stopping it from being blown up. These portrayals are progressive in that they change the traditional gender perception of women as often being weak. But this crisis ends with Liu Peiqiang sacrificing himself to protect her in the explosion. After completing the portrayal of the strong woman Han Duoduo, she turns back into the weak who needs male protection. In the second half, Han loses her ability to work because of cancer and becomes a burden to the family. Her illness drives Liu Peiqiang to decide to participate in the astronaut selection. When Liu is distressed by the selection, she offers to let him give her up, reflecting the self-sacrificial devotion of the mother image in the family.

Hao Xiaoxi is a growing national spokesperson. Initially, she is just an assistant of Zhou Zhezhi, following his instructions and teachings. She gets overwhelmed when her speech is interrupted and does not know how to control her emotions. As the plot progresses, Hao Xiaoxi gradually becomes mature—her characterization shifts from emotionally expressive to calm and rational. By the film's end, Hao has become a leader who can guide the younger generation like Zhou once guided her. Because national spokeswomen are a minority in reality, the ability to portray a female leader who has moved from immaturity to maturity in the film shows the attention the production team has paid to this aspect.

The differences between the two female characters are obvious in terms of narrative function. While Han Duoduo is marginalized and functional, Hao Xiaoxi takes on the part of the most important plot. This is related to the focus of the plot they are involved. Han's plot focuses on complementing the backstory of Liu Peiqiang. Her being protected highlights Liu Peiqiang's sense of responsibility. Although Hao's plot also has a portrayal of Zhou Zhezhi, the growth of character in the plot is placed entirely on her. Placing female characters completely at the center of the plot is something no previous Chinese science fiction film has done.

4 The Absence of Women in Chinese Science Fiction Films

This article has examined 16 female characters in Chinese science fiction films, analyzing their characterization and narrative functions. It can be seen that the image of female characters portrayed in the films tends to follow the time development, and the characters carry the reflection of the society they live in.

In the 1950s, influenced by ideas that were strongly promoted then, women in film would not accentuate their femininity. Female students wore school uniforms, while adult women usually wore unisex clothes and were self-conscious about being male in their work. After the reform and opening up, with the development of feminism, women wearing feminine clothes and showing feminine beauty began to appear in films. But with the implementation of the commodity economy, the problem of women being used simply as objects to be watched began to arise. The image of the woman as a subordinate and eye candy in the male world was reintroduced into the social consumption system^[1]. Male gaze shots also began to be mixed in the films. Although female characters were freed from a single neutral image, they were facing the crisis of being gradually marginalized. An increasing number of female characters have been reduced to mere embellishments within the film. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of feminism in China, leading to a shift in the portrayal of female characters as they strive to transcend the confines of male-dominated narratives. Consequently, female protagonists are now emerging in film.

The 16 female characters mentioned above can be divided into three categories based on their image and role in the film: active promoters of the plot, passive participants of the story, and background characters.

The first category is the active promoter of the plot. These characters are involved in the film's main narrative and take an active role in advancing the story. These characters often take on important plots, have their storyline, and have complete characterization, showing how their image changes with the story. This category of roles is progressive in the sense that it breaks away from the traditional gender concept of women. The only character who belongs to this category is Hao Xiaoxi.

The second category is the passive participants of the story. These characters predominantly occupy the central narrative, yet their reactions become increasingly passive as the story unfolds. Frequently, these characters assume the role of foils to the protagonist, effectively highlighting the protagonist's qualities through the film's constrained depiction of their own characters. They are still stuck in the traditional gender perception, and men are still the absolute power masters and spiritual supports. Most of the characters belong to this category: the girl, Zhou Jing, Sun Guifang, Yang, Jinfeng, Weiwei, Xue Shuying, the female robber, Han Duoduo (the Wandering Earth), Zhou Qian and Han Duoduo (the Wandering Earth 2).

The third category is the background characters outside the story. These characters are not involved in the main narrative at all. Their characterization is mostly flat and often accompanied by some kind of functionality. Such roles often carry some sort of symbolization of women, such as teachers and mothers. The characters belonging to this category are Mona, Yang Lijuan, the secretary, and Ms. Yuan.

According to the summary, in Chinese science fiction films, female characters who take the lead role and those not involved in the main narrative are in the minority. It is the second category of characters that occupy the majority. Women are mostly portrayed as passive and weak in Chinese science fiction films. The vast majority of female characters do not receive complete characterization, and the films focus on men. This situation is the absence of women in the films' core and a distrust of women taking on the main plot. In the context of Chinese science fiction films, women are still in a kind of absence of presence.

5 Conclusion

This paper studies Chinese science fiction films, selecting nine representative films and analyzing the characterization and narrative functions of female characters. The study involved 16 female characters in total. The study found that most of these female characters were passive participants in the story, playing the role of a foil to the male protagonist. Their characterization is based on traditional concepts and stereotypes, and their narrative function is functional and marginalized. This indicates that the portrayal of female characters in Chinese science fiction films is flawed from a male perspective. The portrayal of these female characters reflects the Chinese feminine consciousness of the times in which they lived and reflects the gradual development of feminism in Chinese science fiction films.

This research benefits the subsequent study of feminism in Chinese science fiction films. This paper analyzes several representative Chinese science fiction films chronologically, sorting out the framework for related studies. Studies for a particular period can be started on this basis. There are still some deficiencies in this study. The number of selected films is slightly insufficient compared to the total, and the representativeness of the obtained results is limited. This paper does not make further connections to the development of Chinese feminism, which could be improved to reveal a clearer lineage of feminist development in Chinese science fiction films.

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