



# A study on the changes in the depiction of women's non-kinship relationships in Chinese TV dramas from 2010 to the present

Yonger Zhou\*

Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Foshan University, Foshan, Guangdong, 528225, China

\*Corresponding author: 20200110123@mail.stu.fosu.edu.cn

**Abstract.** In the past, the portrayal of relationships between female characters in Chinese TV dramas has often focused on conflict and strife. Female friendships were often portrayed negatively and superficially on screen. However, with the recent economic development, changes in social consciousness and increasing awareness of women's issues, the portrayal of relationships between female characters in Chinese TV dramas has significantly changed. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, this paper examines the development of the portrayal of female friendships in Chinese TV dramas from 2010 to the present. It finds that the portrayal of female characters' relationships has become more multifaceted and complex, moving away from the rigid and one-dimensional depictions of the past. Female friendships are now portrayed with more possibilities on screen. Although female-oriented TV dramas are still niche and lack mainstream appeal, this is a positive trend. As long as production companies are willing to think from a woman's perspective, "she-themed" TV dramas could become a mainstream trend. This trend would lead to more viewers changing their stereotypical views of women and society becoming more friendly towards women, making their future bright and hopeful. This study is in the field of media and journalism.

**Keywords:** female friendship, feminism, TV drama stereotype

## 1 Introduction

Female friendships have historically been undervalued, with labels such as 'female competition', 'plastic friendships' and 'backstabbing' applied to them. Even within female communities <sup>[1]</sup>. There is a tendency to self-stigmatize female friendships. The portrayal of female relationships in TV dramas often reinforces these stereotypes, with women being portrayed as being in conflict over a man or for personal gain. Male friendships, on the other hand, are portrayed as positive and focused on loyalty. This imbalance reinforces stereotypes about female relationships and is unfair to women. However, with social progress and the rise of feminism in China, people's attitudes

education and new ideas, and their sense of independence is awakening. The rise of "their economy" has also meant that women's demands have been taken seriously in the marketplace, and this attention has been reflected in the production of TV dramas. As a result, there has been a gradual shift towards multidimensional and complex portrayals of female relationships in TV dramas.

Overall, few studies analyze the portrayal of female relationships in TV dramas, and even fewer compare changes over time. As an important part of the mass media, television drama can directly influence social psychology and arouse public emotion. The portrayal of social issues has significant real-life implications [2]. Therefore, from a feminist perspective, this paper analyses the portrayal of female relationships in Chinese TV dramas in recent years, using Simone de Beauvoir's theory of the other and Michel Foucault's theory of power discourse to explore changes in social consciousness and the development of women's consciousness. Based on industry reports and content analysis of TV dramas, this paper focuses on mainland Chinese TV dramas from the past decade to explore how the portrayal of female relationships has changed. The study aims to inspire future TV drama creations related to female characters and female relationships. This study falls within the field of media and journalism.

## **2 The Ways and Factors of Presenting Female Relationships in Early TV Dramas**

### **2.1 Early female non-kinship presentation**

The portrayal of non-consanguineous female relationships in Chinese television dramas mainly revolves around the roles of best friends, love rivals, classmates and colleagues, with competition being the predominant theme. The portrayal of female friendships in these dramas often tends towards relationships in which women compete for male attention and affection, exemplifying a form of female competition known as "female intrasexual competition". When two female characters are love rivals, they engage in jealousy, overt or covert rivalry, and strategize to gain the attention of the male protagonist. If portrayed as best friends, they often become bitter enemies because they fall in love with the same man later in the story. As a result, these so-called friendships are unstable and easily broken. The 2011 television drama "Home Temptation" depicts a female protagonist who seeks revenge after her best friend steals her husband. This was followed by numerous television dramas that degraded female friendships, such as "Refueling Mother" in 2012, "Noble Bride: Regretless Love" in 2013 and "Soul Mate" in 2016. These works highlight the themes of sisters competing for love and best friends turning against each other. Best friends are often associated with negative terms such as third parties, man-stealers and manipulative individuals. Their role is reduced to that of antagonistic characters who create conflict, making female friendships a source of dramatic tension and plot development. The struggle between best friends and the female protagonist ultimately leads to internal conflict and self-destruction among women [3]. Genuine portrayals of authentic, healthy and enduring female friendships in television drama are rare.

## 2.2 Reasons for Stereotyping Female Friendship Relationships

Despite China's rapid socio-economic development in the early 21st century, conservative and traditional ideologies persisted, and feminism was in its infancy. During this period, women's awareness of their self-worth was not particularly strong, influenced mainly by traditional beliefs that positioned women as subordinate to the male value system<sup>[4]</sup>. Women were seen as the 'other', excluded from the realm of masculine values, and power was predominantly held by men, with women as mere followers<sup>[5]</sup>. As a result, the portrayal of female relationships in television dramas revolved around male characters, with plots centred on serving the male protagonist.

Since the national sensation caused by the television drama *Home Temptation* in 2011, production companies have recognized the market potential of storylines depicting fractured female friendships. Capitalizing on this audience preference, production companies took shortcuts in their creative processes and were unwilling to invest effort in understanding and shaping authentic female relationships. Instead, they mechanically churned out a large number of similarly themed dramas. As a result, the following years saw a plethora of dramas that emphasized sisters turning against each other and female characters engaging in cutthroat competition. According to data from annual rating charts between 2011 and 2016, half of the highest-rated television dramas on Hunan TV depicted female relationships centred on betrayal and love rivalry between best friends and love rivals. The main audience during this period was middle-aged and young people busy with work and watching TV dramas to pass the time. Dramas that required minimal thinking featured exaggerated and exciting plots and had fluctuating storylines that captured viewers' attention most effectively. Thus, the stereotypical and negative portrayal of female friendships, full of conflict and intensifying rivalries, catered to viewers' preferences and resulted in higher ratings.

Foucault's 'discourse power theory' argues that discourse and power are inseparable and that real power is achieved through discourse<sup>[6]</sup>. In 2010, men predominantly ran television drama production companies and female friendships were portrayed according to their stereotypical images. Stereotypes are shaped by those who hold dominance and discourse power within society, and in the case of patriarchal societies, men hold discourse power. To maintain male dominance, men have imposed stereotypes on women and their relationships. The stereotypes created by men have become a collective consensus<sup>[7]</sup>. Female friends are equated with third parties and the female protagonist is pitted against her best friend, leading to female intrasexual competition. In the hands of male directors, the storyline of female friendships becomes a sacrifice to reinforce the dominance of male power and discourse. In a patriarchal society, men shape the image of women and their relationships according to their own ideas and desires, while women are relegated to the position of the 'other' and their voices are silenced. Thus, the negative portrayal of female friendships in television dramas reflects male stereotypes, and actresses who truly understand female relationships can only conform to the arrangements of male directors, acting from a male perspective.

Men hold dominant positions in society and have considerable discursive power. By depicting stereotypical female relationships in television dramas, they construct a male-centred discourse and convey idealized female relationships that conform to the desires

and expectations of patriarchal society. They aim to incite competition among women, leading to the deterioration of relationships and the fragmentation of female voices, ultimately reinforcing women's dependence on men and consolidating male dominance in society. The values disseminated and projected through television dramas unconsciously shape women's acceptance of this power structure and become internalized as a collective unconscious. As Simone de Beauvoir said in "The Second Sex", Women are not born as 'women', they are shaped by social rules during their growth.<sup>[8]</sup> Under the influence of predominantly feminine ideas of competition in female relationships, some young viewers, who have not yet developed a complete set of values, may internalize these stereotypes while watching television dramas. As a result, they may overlook the importance of same-sex friendships and perceive same-sex friends as rivals competing for the attention of the opposite sex. Over time, women's collective consciousness becomes increasingly fragmented, while the power structure dominated by male discourse remains unchallenged.

### 3 Changes and Reasons Behind

#### 3.1 The time point of transformation and development

In 2016, a television drama called "Ode to Joy" premiered on Dragon TV, following the lives of five very different girls living together under one roof. The series immediately attracted national attention and became an internet sensation. The show resonated with viewers by addressing social issues relevant to the characters' lives and work, showing the power of female friendship, and challenging traditional viewing experiences with its realistic portrayal of women. "Ode to Joy" became the first series of the year to surpass 10 billion online views and topped the Baidu Index chart, attracting a huge audience. Industry reports showed that "Ode to Joy 1" was the most watched in 2016, while "Ode to Joy 2" secured the second place in 2017<sup>[9]</sup>. The unexpected success of "Ode to Joy" led television producers to recognize the market for female-centric ensemble dramas, resulting in a gradual shift in the portrayal of female relationships, especially female friendships, in television dramas from 2016.

2018 the historical drama "Story of Yanxi Palace" became a sensation. The series depicted the story of a palace maid, Wei Yingluo, who fearlessly and skillfully navigated the challenges of the imperial court, eventually becoming a beloved imperial consort who supported the prosperous era of Emperor Qianlong. According to industry reports, since 2018, historical dramas with strong female leads have emerged as a trend<sup>[10]</sup>, and female-centric themes have begun to dominate the screen<sup>[11]</sup>.

In the summer of 2020, two urban dramas, "Twenty Your Life On" and "Nothing But Thirty", aired on Hunan TV and Dragon TV, respectively, sparked widespread discussion and became the focus of the summer vacation time. "Twenty Your Life On" revolved around the lives of four college students about to enter the workforce, depicting their youthful struggles and growth. The friendship and experiences of these young women resonated with many recent graduates and attracted a significant young audience. On the other hand, Nothing but Thirty follows the stories of three women in their thirties, exploring the pressures they face at this crucial age. The three main characters

were well-rounded personalities who broke away from traditional female roles, showing their independence and confidence, and were praised by viewers. Both series placed female characters at the forefront, breaking away from the conventional narrative where women are used as a foil to enhance the appeal of male characters. Female characters had their own independent storylines, showing their growth and development. The portrayal of positive and warm friendships became a central theme. Audiences recognized the strength of female friendship and appreciated this portrayal, while TV producers realized the huge audience potential of female-centric dramas. According to data, in 2020, 18% of viewers preferred dramas with a female perspective<sup>[12]</sup>. The "female-centric" genre began to flourish as women moved from being "expressed" to being "seen". Subsequently, the number of multidimensional portrayals of female relationships and female characters in TV dramas increased, with a significant surge in development from 2021 onwards.

### 3.2 Transformed multi-female relationships

Since 2016, the portrayal of female relationships in television dramas has gradually changed. Over the past five years, the portrayal of female relationships has shifted from one-dimensional and singular perspectives to multidimensional and diverse representations. Female characters have evolved from thin and one-dimensional to more complex and well-rounded. In recent years, TV dramas have dared to acknowledge women's independence and highlight the positive aspects of female relationships.

In recent years, TV dramas have shown a variety of female friendships. First, there is the "dual female lead" narrative style, exemplified by dramas such as "My Best Friend's Story" and "Dear Missy", which aired in 2020. Compared to ensemble dramas with multiple storylines, dual female lead dramas narrow the story's focus, simplify horizontal character relationships, and delve deeper into vertical character relationships. They emphasize how two women support and influence each other in their development. These dramas challenge male dominance in discourse by focusing on and depicting female friendship and achieve a true awakening of feminism<sup>[13]</sup>.

Secondly, there are the classic "three female leads" dramas. There is a saying that "three women make a play", but this statement often carries a derogatory connotation, implying that where there are many women, there will be many conflicts. However, the drama *Delicious Romance* aired in 2021, centers on three urban women with contrasting personalities and explores women's issues through light-hearted comedy. The writer weaves the characters' relationships through their daily interactions and dialogues, presenting individual storylines for each woman while bringing their warm and affectionate friendship together. In addition to female friendship, the portrayal of "love rivals" in recent TV dramas has shifted from a singularly competitive relationship to one of mutual support and understanding. In "Under the Skin", the ex-wife and the current wife, both victims of an abusive man, help each other and unite against him. In "Turn On The Right Way Of Life" in 2023, when the male lead's ex-girlfriend meets his current wife, there is no animosity between them. Instead, they are curious about and appreciate each other and eventually become friends. The suspense drama "A Murderous Affair in Horizon Tower" in 2020 begins with the story of a third party in a

relationship. However, the ending reveals a scheme woven by three women to take revenge on their victimized friend. The understanding, empathy and redemption between these women highlights the power of female friendship.

### 3.3 Reason behind the shift

In 2010-2015, there was a proliferation of TV dramas about emotional crises and rivalry between best friends. However, audiences gradually grew tired of narratives that adhered to traditional patriarchal logic, flat female characters that served as appendages to male leads, and plots that revolved around female competition for male attention. They were tired of female relationships being reduced to mere tools for accentuating male charm. Audiences wanted to see authentic female struggles, the portrayal of female attractiveness and value, and the independent characterization of female individuals. This demand for remarkable film and television productions that genuinely reflected female relationships provided fertile ground for the 'explosion' of female-centred drama, leading to increased television dramas that portrayed female relationships from various perspectives.

As feminism has become a major research focus in recent years, feminist ideas and women's consciousness have become more widespread. Changing social norms, driven by economic development, have led more production companies to understand and incorporate feminist ideologies. As the mindset of production teams evolved, they became more willing to truly understand female relationships, moving from portraying them through a male gaze to observing and portraying them from a female perspective. The influence of Western movements such as 'Girls Help Girls' and the #MeToo movement in the US, which gained momentum in 2017, has also reached China, providing encouragement and empowerment to women trapped in difficult situations. In addition, frequent news stories highlighting violations of women's rights in recent years have sparked widespread discussion, especially among women's online communities. Women have shown a greater willingness to unite to protect their rights and those of their fellow women and promote mutual understanding and support. The power of female friendships, as seen in these real-life scenarios, has allowed more people to understand the diverse nature of female relationships. As a result, storylines in TV dramas that maliciously portrayed female friendships gradually lost acceptance among viewers.

The increasing number of educated women, who have experienced liberation in their ideological perspectives, also plays an important role. Data shows that since 2013, Chinese women have made positive progress in areas such as employment and education. In particular, the proportion of women pursuing higher education, including master's and doctoral degrees, and the proportion of female teachers have increased rapidly compared to a decade ago<sup>[14]</sup>. Educated women naturally seek intellectual pursuits and place greater emphasis on the portrayal of female relationships in TV dramas. They are no longer passive recipients of the values conveyed in traditional TV dramas but have begun to reflect and to awaken. They are tired of the one-dimensional portrayal of female relationships and value authenticity. According to user demographics, female viewers comprise 60% to 70% of the total audience<sup>[15]</sup>, making them the driving force behind drama consumption. The "she economy" has grown, and the demands of female

viewers have significantly stimulated the diversification of female-centric themes. Faced with this substantial female audience, investors and production companies have become more attentive to the female market and to the needs of female viewers. In order to attract female viewers, there has been a gradual increase in female-centric themes, leading to a more diverse and positive portrayal of female relationships.

As women's issues are increasingly recognized, more and more female directors, screenwriters and filmmakers with a female perspective are being recognized by the industry. They contribute their creative efforts to express women's experiences from a female perspective, resulting in more authentic and multidimensional portrayals of female relationships. This challenges the stereotypes and misconceptions associated with female relationships and reclaims the narrative space within television drama that belongs to women.

## **4 Existing Dilemma and Development Orientation**

### **4.1 Current Difficulties and Deficiencies**

Despite the proliferation of female-centric TV dramas and some well-received productions in recent years, these shows primarily target a niche market focused on young women. The audience for such dramas remains relatively fixed, making it a niche genre with limited appeal and impact. Mainstream dramas continue to adopt a predominantly male perspective, in line with the positioning of state television networks such as CCTV. These dramas cater mainly to the preferences of male viewers, with themes such as the military, historical periods and rural settings. Outstanding main theme productions such as "The Age of Awakening", "Minning Town," and "Like a Flowing River" have limited depictions of female relationships, with the majority of the narrative centred on male characters. Reclaiming narrative space for women remains a significant and ongoing challenge.

Many works that claim to be female-centred still contain strong undercurrents of male-centred thinking. Some TV dramas advertise themselves as promoting "female independence" and "female empowerment" by portraying female characters as highly independent and autonomous. However, when faced with difficulties, these characters still rely on male protagonists to rescue them, thus failing to break free from the constraints of a male perspective. While "she-themed" film and television productions show female independence, there is often an imbalance in the characterisation of male and female roles. Male characters serve as instrumental tools to emphasise female independence, portraying overwhelming paternal pressure or committing ethical and moral lapses pushing women into passive rebellion. This rebellion still cannot escape the confines of a male-dominated society and the binary opposition between the sexes [2].

Although most "she-themed" TV dramas have the courage to address women's issues, they often oscillate between confronting challenges and capitalising on fears. These dramas exaggerate women's sense of independence and their ability to transcend the normal limitations of women in real life. Paradoxically, this places additional pressure and anxiety on women. In addition, female characters in these dramas are often

trapped in gender anxieties. An increasing number of TV dramas emphasise "female relationships" and "female growth" as selling points, but their content revolves mainly around women's age-related anxieties. In addition, some dramas deliberately diminish male characters in an attempt to highlight female friendship or female power by provoking gender conflicts and various social contradictions. These dramas only seek to be popular and generate online traffic, and make no real effort to portray authentic female friendships.

## 4.2 Suggestions for future development

Moving away from men is not about antagonising them but about women constructing themselves as individuals, distinct from men, and embracing their own identities [6]. This is the way forward for feminism. When production companies portray female relationships, they should restore the agency of female characters as autonomous individuals. By accurately and profoundly depicting the relationships between different women based on their unique characteristics, female characters should no longer be portrayed as subordinate to male characters. Instead, the portrayal of female relationships should be returned to women themselves. In addition, future "she-themed" film and television productions should feature a wider range of female characters, show their experiences from a female perspective and demonstrate humanistic care. This approach will contribute to constructing equal, independent and empowered female images and explore a more egalitarian gender discourse.

When depicting female relationships, it is essential to establish equal relationships between the sexes. Simply reducing male characters to portray female relationships would only repeat the mistakes of the past and resemble the male-dominated portrayal of stereotypical female characters. Only by adopting a more rational and objective perspective in designing male characters can producers enable audiences to view them from a more egalitarian standpoint. This approach ensures that the power of female friendships can be effectively communicated to audiences.

## 5 Conclusion

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on feminist research in various sectors of society. Women have gradually realised the need to break free from the rules and invisible constraints imposed by a male-dominated society. They are no longer passively accepting the values and stereotypes imposed on them by men. Instead, they are awakening, reclaiming their voices and boldly expressing themselves with unity and confidence. This wave of female empowerment has also changed the portrayal of female relationships in television dramas. Today's TV dramas aim to present and portray female relationships from diverse and nuanced perspectives, striving to showcase authentic female friendships and female power.

However, in their celebration of female friendship, some of these dramas deliberately diminish male characters, exaggerate female capabilities and create gender anxieties. Essentially, they are still struggling to break free from the shackles of the male



perspective and are putting more pressure on female viewers. Nevertheless, the diverse and authentic portrayal of female relationships is a positive starting point and should be the future mainstream trend. As long as production companies approach the portrayal of female relationships from a more rational and objective standpoint while staying true to real-life experiences, it is believed that soon, more viewers will understand and appreciate the positive and warm aspects of female relationships.

This article explores the changes in the portrayal of female relationships in mainland Chinese TV dramas from 2010 to the present, an area that has not been researched. Hopefully, this article will inspire production companies and the television industry to create and develop outstanding TV dramas with female-centred themes that depict vibrant female relationships.

However, it is important to note that this article only analyses the period from 2010 to the present in mainland Chinese TV dramas, which has limitations in terms of period. In addition, this article did not collect evaluations of the portrayal of female relationships in TV dramas from different periods or data on the impact of these changes on female viewers in real life. In light of these limitations, the article offers suggestions for future research, highlighting the need to collect data on these two aspects to delve deeper into the issue and draw more comprehensive conclusions.

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