



A Comparative Study On The Representation Of Female Images In Women's Films

——Taking "*Modern Women*" (1945) and "*Delicious Romance*" (2021) as Examples

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Abstract. In recent years, there has been an "explosive" growth in women's films focusing on the development of women and the expression of female consciousness, with countless impressive female characters resonating far beyond their traditional audiences. This thesis, grounded in the framework of Social Exchange Theory and from the perspective of emotional relationships, classifies and compares the representation of female characters in the films *Modern Women* and *Delicious Romance*. It identifies three modes of female image representation: "Significant Contribution", "Minimal Contribution" and "Balanced Contribution". This study provides a new analytical perspective on the commonalities in the representation of female characters in women's films. It offers insights into the future of women's films, encouraging more diverse character portrayals and more sophisticated representations of emotional content.

Keywords: Women's films, Female media image, Image comparison, Modern Women, *Delicious Romance*.

1 Introduction

In recent years, topics related to women and the resulting new terminology have become increasingly prominent, with growing recognition of women's rights and their purchasing power. As early as 2022, the potential of the "She economy" ^[1] had already been consistently validated—China had nearly 400 million adult female consumers, with annual consumer spending reaching as high as 10 trillion yuan (Yicai, 2022) ^[2]. As reported in QuestMobile's 2024 She Insight Report, between March 2023 and March 2024, the percentage of female users in the mobile internet sector continuously rose to 49.5%, with the active user count climbing to nearly 610 million ^[3]. Following this trend, "She-themed" films and television series such as *You Only Live Once* ^[4] and *The QUEEN of News* ^[5] also successfully broke into the mainstream.

As "The Seventh Art", Film art's inclusiveness provides ample expressive space for the representation and creation of countless female images on the screen. By retaining a realistic portrayal and reflecting the media's construction of female identity, films also reveal the societal attitudes towards women of the time, serving as a vital resource for research related to women. Released in 1945, *Modern Women* [6] centers on the emotional journeys of two sisters, posing the question, "What does it mean to be a truly modern woman?" and igniting a fashion of "feminism" in China during that period. *Delicious Romance* (2021) [7], a standout example of a "She-themed" film, employs a humorous and light-hearted approach to examine the challenges and confusion encountered by three urban women in their careers, relationships, and family life, making a remarkable leap from an unnoticed, low-budget production to a "phenomenon" of widespread popularity. In summary, this thesis selects *Modern Women* and *Delicious Romance*, two films that focus on women's lives and self-growth. By transcending temporal and spatial boundaries, this study seeks to explore whether the two films share similarities in their portrayal of female media images and the dissemination of feminist core values, followed by comparative analysis and argumentation.

2 Literature Review

"Women's films" refer to films that primarily focus on women as their main subjects [8]. In 1983, He Zhiyun recognized the importance of "creating female representations" in his article published in *Movie Review*, stating that this would "provide us with a key to analyze and understand the screen images of women in the new era" [9]. In this context, "creating female representations" can be understood as the creation of "female media images." However, it is important to note that "Media Image" is defined narrowly, referring to the image of people or things that are organized and represented by mass communication channels [10]. Therefore, in this study, the "Female Media Image" in "Women's Films" will be defined as "the image of women organized and represented through films that primarily focus on women", and this will be further explored.

The research samples for this study are the films *Modern Women* (1945) and *Delicious Romance* (2021). There is limited scholarly research on *Modern Women* both domestically and internationally. However, domestic scholars' research on *Delicious Romance* can be broadly categorized into two areas: narrative and female imagery. In terms of narrative, Si Jiahui argues that *Delicious Romance* achieves a new feminist value orientation through its approach to themes, character development, and value guidance [11]. In contrast, Xue Genhua contends that, despite its attempt to challenge the constraints of a patriarchal structure, the film remains shackled by the constraints of capital, with little improvement in this regard [12]. Regarding female imagery, Xu Jin Xingzi concludes, after analyzing the female characters in *Delicious Romance*, that the formation of these images is closely related to shifts in traditional views, the enhancement of women's discourse power, and the preferences of film audiences [13].

In comparative studies of women’s films, most scholars choose research samples from different directors of the same era or different films released around the same time. However, there is relatively little research comparing female characters in women’s films across different eras. Chen Weihu, for instance, focuses on a comparison between the female images in the Seventeen -Year film (1949-1966) Youth in Our Village ^[14] and the modern drama Go Lala Go ^[15], arguing that “Investigating the shaping of female images and the construction of women’s survival patterns in films holds significant guiding importance for feminist film making in China” ^[16]. Comparing women’s films from different periods through a historical perspective allows for a more in-depth understanding of the experiences and conditions of women in Chinese society, both historically and today. The research findings can offer valuable references and guidance for the representation of female images and the methods of conveying feminist values in contemporary women’s films.

3 Social Exchange Theory

"All contacts among men rest on the schema of giving and returning the equivalence" ^[17]. In his "Social Exchange Theory", American sociologist Peter Michael Blau posits that the reason individuals engage in interactions is that they mutually benefit from these exchanges. This "benefit" is referred to as a "Reward," which can be categorized into "Intrinsic Rewards" and "Extrinsic Rewards" ^[18]. Intrinsic rewards are those derived from within the social relationship itself, such as love, passion, pleasure, enjoyment, and gratitude, which can explain the motivations closely tied to emotional relationships.

The emotional relationships between characters in the plot significantly influence the construction of their images. As illustrated in the table below, this study will categorize five female characters (within five different emotional relationships) based on the comparison of "Intrinsic Rewards" they receive and the scale and quality of their individual contributions in emotional relationships. These images will be tentatively classified as "Significant Contribution" images, "Minimal Contribution" images, and "Balanced Contribution" images.

Table 1. Three types of female images were generated based on the classification

Individual Contributions	Intrinsic Rewards		
	Relatively Small	Relatively Large	Relatively Equal

Relatively Small		Minimal Contribution	
Relatively Large	Significant Contribution		
Relatively Equal			Balanced Contribution

4 Representation of Female Images

4.1 Representation of the "Significant Contribution" Image

When the "intrinsic rewards" that a woman receives in a relationship are less than her individual contributions, a scenario arises where the woman is more dominant and makes greater sacrifices—this is the "Significant Contribution" situation. In the film *Delicious Romance*, Xia Meng enters the audience's view as a "strong woman." In the workplace, she is assertive, with a strong sense of purpose and conviction. In her relationship, however, when faced with Lu Bin, a fitness coach whose professional status and income are not on par with hers, Xia Meng chooses tolerance and compromise. The "intrinsic rewards" she gains from this relationship mainly come from Lu Bin's quiet yet dependable personality, and the sense of pleasure she derives from his rescue when she is in distress. However, in this relationship, Xia Meng's contributions are largely characterized by an effort to "downwardly accommodate" , attempting to hide her strengths in front of Lu Bin. Yet, this does not spare her from moments of loneliness—such as when, after a disagreement with Fang Xin and Liu Jing, she returns to a hotel room that greets her with nothing but emptiness and the cold, quiet night outside the window.

As the second "Significant Contribution" image in *Delicious Romance*, Liu Jing is portrayed as an independent, thoughtful woman who values family. As her restaurant was shut down due to fire safety inspections, she unexpectedly found out that her long-term boyfriend, Jiang Shanmu, had been secretly meeting other women through dating apps. To demonstrate her own attractiveness, Liu Jing chooses to end the relationship abruptly and forces herself into new relationships. “Why does every show have to have romance? Can’t this woman live without love?” ^[19] — this iconic line from Liu Jing highlights the inner conflict she faces when it comes to emotional relationships. Later in the film, after the death of her grandfather and the evolution of her new romantic interest into a close friend, Liu Jing comes to realize that independence does not require proving anything to others, nor should it involve self-pressure or self-harm. Ultimately, Liu Jing understands that what she truly seeks is not merely a relationship, but an understanding of what kind of relationship is most fitting for her.

4.2 Representation of the "Minimal Contribution" Image

When the "intrinsic rewards" a woman receives exceed her individual contributions, a scenario arises in which the man is dominant and sacrifices more, resulting in a "Minimal Contribution" situation. In stark contrast to Xia Meng's "significant contribution" image is the character "Yunzhen" from *Modern Women*. As a socialite and a skilled orator, Yunzhen dedicates almost all of her passion to her career. Even when her child is gravely ill, she remains committed to promoting feminism, resenting a flawless image to the public in exchange for applause. Yunzhen's husband, Zhihua, is introverted and mild-mannered, with limited communication skills. In this relationship, the "intrinsic rewards" Yunzhen receives from her husband—countless instances of understanding, tolerance, and attempts at communication—are merely signals to her that she can continue to act without restraint. Meanwhile, Yunzhen lacks the care and affection for her husband and son, turning her so-called "contributions" into a self-sacrificial form of self-gratification. Ultimately, Zhihua files for divorce. This is also why the author classifies Yunzhen and Xia Meng—both strong-willed, career-oriented women—into two distinct image types.

Another typical "Minimal Contribution" image is found in the character "Fang Xin" from *Delicious Romance*. Despite being pregnant before marriage, the sweet and charming Fang Xin continues to work hard at a fashion company, striving to prove her abilities. Her boyfriend, Zhang Ting, becomes increasingly cautious due to her pregnancy, taking on nearly all responsibilities in their relationship. Zhang Ting's nearly exhaustive efforts deeply move Fang Xin. While she receives "intrinsic rewards" from Zhang Ting in the form of care and meticulous attention, she also begins to feel confused, wondering whether this might be a form of "excessive control" and whether she can offer Zhang Ting the same "intrinsic rewards" in return. Ultimately, Fang Xin temporarily rejects Zhang Ting's marriage proposal, courageously expressing her true feelings.

4.3 Representation of the "Balanced Contribution" Image

When the "Intrinsic Rewards" a woman receives are commensurate with her individual contributions, a "Balanced Contribution" state is achieved, where both partners share equal leadership. As an idealized image, the "Balanced Contribution" often represents the "model couple" frequently admired by audiences. A prime example of this is the couple Han Min and Mei Ying from *Modern Women*. Mei Ying, who exudes a gentle and gracious aura, serves as the director of a girls' school and carries herself with a poised and refined elegance. Han Min, working at a bank, is characterized by his cheerful and easygoing personality, along with his extraordinary consideration for others. In their relationship, they uphold a marriage founded on mutual respect and heartfelt care for each other. Mei Ying expresses, "In my view, managing the household and raising children are a woman's most honorable duties." Han Min often remarks, "Family happiness is what matters most." After the divorce of Mei Ying's cousin Yunzhen and her husband Zhihua, the couple even helps care

for their child, eventually assisting Yunzhen and Zhihua in reconciling on the night of the Mid-Autumn Festival.

5 Discussion

Grounded in sociological theory and viewed through the lens of emotional relationships, this study categorizes female images in women's films into three distinct types: "Significant Contribution" (where the "Intrinsic Rewards" a woman receives in a relationship are less than her individual contributions), "Minimal Contribution" (where the "Intrinsic Rewards" a woman receives exceed her individual contributions), and "Balanced Contribution" (where the "Intrinsic Rewards" a woman receives are equivalent to her individual contributions). Though this method of classification contrasts with the approaches favored by the majority of scholars in previous research, which often rely on historical development or character differences as criteria, it applies a new sociological perspective to explore the shared characteristics in the representation of female images in women's films, allowing for a more effective understanding of the convergence between cinematic and societal portrayals of women. This approach not only enriches and expands the comparative study of female image representation in film but also extends the application of sociological research into the field of film research.

When female images are shaped, it not only reflects the direct expectations of society for female images, but also reveals the director's personal intentions. *Modern Women* was filmed in 1945, on the eve of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Influenced by the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement, feminist thought was beginning to take root. Against this historical backdrop, the film *Modern Women* already starts to address issues such as "breaking free from the shackles of feudalism and liberating women" and "balancing family and career in marriage," demonstrating the film's progressive feminist core. However, the director also paid close attention to aligning with the societal demands and didactic intentions of the time by portraying a "reformed" traditional wife, thereby advocating for dedication to family and society. This redefined the notion of the "modern women" of that era as a new type of woman who is elegant and poised, proficient in both social settings and domestic duties, caring for her husband and children, and attentive to her family's needs.

In contemporary society, where the concept of "gender equality" has been widely embraced, the film *Delicious Romance* emerged in response to these changing attitudes. In light of society's expectations for "strong women" and "female leads," *Delicious Romance* chooses to focus on new issues and concerns faced by women, such as premarital pregnancy, fear of marriage, workplace bullying, mental health, and the use of dating apps. The film presents a distinctive feminist core, suggesting that women, while enjoying the pleasures of love, do not necessarily need to achieve this through a perfect marriage or an ideal partner; rather, they can discover their true selves within the experience of love. The director also indirectly conveys hope for the broader female audience by bringing to the screen the journey of three ordinary girls,

each grappling with different troubles, who, despite facing setbacks and disappointments, continue to move forward courageously together.

6 Conclusion

The year 2025 marks the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. The three modes of female image representation discovered from this study provide a new sociological analytical perspective on the commonalities in the representation of female characters in women's films. In today's context, where women's issues are increasingly prioritized, numerous outstanding women's films have emerged, portraying rich and diverse female images on screen. These films not only narrate the transformations of the times and the awakening of women but also provoke thought and evoke emotion in audiences. Simultaneously, addressing how to overcome the creative bottlenecks in women's filmmaking will be particularly important for the future of the industry. Although "in a modern consumer society, film and television works serve as cultural showcases and idealized reflections" ^[11], it would be a significant loss if they were to sacrifice their realism and artistic integrity. The key to the long-term development of women's cinema lies in creating works that not only align with the current market dynamics but also genuinely address the realities of women's lives today, thereby authentically conveying a true sense of female consciousness.

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