

Gaze, Female Agency, and Gender Power Dynamics in Chinese Chick Flicks in the 2000s

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Abstract: Chick flick is an emerging film genre in the 2000s, which usually involves elements of sentiment, fashion, and a female leading character. It centers on female characters and is situated in the themes of romance and the discovery of self-meaning, and therefore triggers the discussion in the field of cine-feminism about its connotations, as well as the presence of gaze and female agency in the film. With analytic lenses applied to the context of China in the modern age, this paper first reviews the theories of Beauvoir, Mulvey, and Bourdieu and then introduces major criticisms of chick flicks in China. From the angles of narrative techniques, cinematography, and staging, it examines the representations of gaze, female agency, and the gender power structure in two typical Chinese chick flicks: *Go Lala Go!* and *Finding Mr. Right*. The results of analysis indicate differences between the two films, lying in the image of female protagonist, the visibility of male gaze and female gaze, and the activeness of female agency, and reveal a bifurcation in the styles of current chick flicks in China, into two distinct forms, with one sticking to conventional themes and westernized paradigms, and the other beginning to indigenize and demonstrate thoughts on serious issues including gender inequality.

Keywords: Chinese women's cinema, cine-feminism, gaze, female agency, gender power dynamics

1. Introduction

Chick flick refers to a sub-genre of films that specifically cater to the aesthetic interests of female audiences [1], with romantic themes and a female leading character, commonly involving sentimental, fashionable, and comedic elements [2, 3]. They center on female protagonists and unfold their stories with humorous narrative styles [4] and usually wind up with a happy ending to express the importance of confidence and self-improvement, enlightening female audiences to construct their own identities in a positive way [5].

Attributed to typification and their imitation of earlier counterparts, 21st-century chick flicks have demonstrated an overall trend of convergence in cinematographic techniques, narrative strategies, and core connotations. In Ferriss and Young's opinion, chick flicks have their roots in Hollywood women's films produced in the silent era, which dealt with events in domestic spheres like weddings, proms, and births [6]. Despite shared female-centric nature and concentration on emotionality, between chick flicks and conventional women's films belies significant differences in main ideas,

because of disparities in sociocultural contexts. Studies show that chick flicks first became prevalent in the 1990s, when neoliberalism was considered the mainstream ideology in the United States [7]. Therefore, as penetrated by neoliberalist discourses emphasizing material values, freedom of choice, and individuality, they tend to focus on women's self-actualization in modern social fields (e.g., workplace), rather than how well they perform traditional gender roles as family carers like women's films do [1].

With chick flicks like *The Princess Diaries* and *The Devil Wears Prada* prevailing in Western cinema and abroad during the early 2000s, similar works by Chinese directors like *Sophie's Revenge* and *Love is Not Blind* gradually came into the sight of domestic cinema as refreshing blockbusters. For their depictions of women's life concerns and inner worlds, chick flicks have been increasingly investigated from the angles of cine-feminism [1], arousing heated discussion about their presence of female agency [8], that is the consciousness of free choice. Since chick flick is a film genre introduced to China within the last few decades, the focus of existing domestic studies is still placed on its features, paradigms, and profitability, with few probing into its macro cultural impacts and interactions with gender power structures.

To fill the insufficiency of research on Chinese chick flicks from the perspectives of gender studies, this paper will examine the gaze, female agency, and gender power dynamics embodied in two Chinese chick flicks ---*Go Lala Go!* and *Finding Mr. Right*. Based on preceding research in this field, it will systematically review the feminist criticisms of Chinese chick flicks, drawing on theoretical concepts of Beauvoir, Mulvey, and Bourdieu, to analyze these two works from the angles of narration, cinematography, and staging, exploring whether chick flicks in today's China are more inclined to representations of women's sociopolitical power, or model operas duplicating toxic objectification of females.

2. Gender, Gaze, Structure & Agency

Before the discussion of controversies about Chinese chick flicks, this section will elucidate three key notions: gender, gaze, and agency to lay the theoretical framework for the analysis of chosen films. In her feminist work *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir argues against the assumed equation between gender and sex and the innateness of gender. As a theoretical foundation of contemporary gender studies, her existentialist feminism identifies the sex-gender distinction, in which sex is characterized as a differentiation based on invariant biological aspects (e.g., sexual organs). Gender is more of a sociocultural construction of femininity and masculinity, that governs one's behaviors, preferences, and personal identification [9, 10].

From Beauvoir's point of view, 'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman'. Under the social system manipulated by androcentric values, humanity is divided into the privileged first sex (male sex) and the disadvantaged second sex (female) [11]. In this dualist structure, the prior is considered positive and neutral, endowed with the dominant place as a subject, in contrast with the latter regarded as negative and submissive objects, not autonomous beings with active agency. Hence, the second sex will be inevitably alienated and marginalized by discourses prioritizing the first sex, with women continuously constructed by such expectations to suit their gender identity, exhibiting compliance, and having their discursive power oppressed in social fields, including family, workplace, and political forums.

Assimilating Beauvoir's feminist theory and the Freudian psychoanalytic models, Mulvey (1975) studied the non-reciprocal gender power dynamics revealed in cinema and coined the terminology of the male gaze. According to Mulvey, the male gaze is an act of portraying women's images as sexual objects in visual arts for the pleasure of heterosexual male viewers. In the representations of narrative cinema, the male gaze is performed in three angles: the male filmmakers behind the camera, the male characters within the cinematic context, and the male spectators gazing at the image [12]. In Visual

Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, she critiques the male gaze for its pornification of women and associates its mechanism with two psychoanalytic models: mirror stage and castration anxiety.

In the first stage of the male gaze, voyeuristic pleasure is produced from primordial scopophilia and the imagination of an ideal mirror ego [12]. Out of scopophilia, the instinctive incentive to take pleasure from curious and controlling looks at a fetishized other [13], spectators can gain sexual satisfaction from eroticized images of the female body. While male audiences play the roles of spectators separated from the real world, they are temporary participants immersed in film settings at the same time. In sealed cinema, the screen will serve as the mirror that allows audiences to envision a perfect self-image through identifying themselves with the characters. For example, seeing female characters please and get conquered by the male, the spectators can perceive the strengthened subjectivity of their own, feel that they are also dominating those women, and therefore experience visual pleasure from voyeuristic activities and their imagined powerful egos.

In the second stage, visual pleasure from the male gaze will evolve and embody in a narcissistic form as a result of castration anxiety. According to Freud, this type of anxiety experienced by males is caused by real or imagined loss of the penis, a signifier that represents their sexual functions and ruling power in gendered social structures [14]. Hence, the awakening of female agency, or any acts disobeying male-chauvinist ideologies, can arouse the castration anxiety of men, and this is also the reason why a gaze for narcissistic pleasure takes place. As the gaze objectifies the other as heteronomous and non-threatening, the castration anxiety by males can be relieved in reality.

Contrary to the male gaze, Mulvey also proposes the concept of the female gaze and encourages its practice in the film industry. Studies indicate that the three viewpoints of the female gaze are just the opposite of the male gaze, which are female filmmakers, female protagonists, and female spectators [12]. Interpretations of the female gaze have been arguable in the field of contemporary gender studies. This term is hypothesized as a reversal of the male gaze at times or visualization of female desires in film characters but now is more frequently understood as the usage of visual and narrative strategies by female filmmakers to represent women as subjects having agency [15], which is the form of gaze that will be discussed in this paper.

On the one side, the female gaze can be positive, as it reinforces the presence of women in cinema and resists the embeddedness of men's authorships [5]. But on the other side, it is doubted by some research for ignoring minorities [2, 16]. Although the female gaze presumes shared experience based on the same gender, it faces criticisms for a sole focus on the angles of white middle-class women [16], and the presence and absence of women's agency constructed by intersectional identities (e.g., social class, ethnicity) therefore becomes a new concern of recent studies.

After explaining gender, male gaze, and female gaze, this section will introduce the third theory that will be applied in the paper, which is the relation of structure and agency proposed by Bourdieu in 1977. In his sociological model, structure is defined as a material or cultural framework, like a norm or ideology, that can influence one's agency--the individual autonomy to act independently and make free decisions [17]. Bourdieu argues that there is a tension between structure and agency, as the structure can condition agency by constructing individuals with its practices. Meanwhile, the agency is also able to affect the dispositions of structure [17]. During the repetitive process in which structure and agency react with each other, the habitus of people or institutions will be nurtured. Habitus is a durable pattern of acting, thinking, and feeling constructed by identity or societal backgrounds. As an unconscious part of one's agency, habitus plays a function in social reproduction, in which structures are preserved by the habitus of individuals continuing to compose them [17].

With analytic lenses applied to the context of gender power dynamics in cinema, these theoretical tools can be used to investigate the position of female agency. In this case, masculinist discourses leading to practices of the male gaze can be understood as the structure that restrains the agency of filmmakers, characters, and audiences of the female sex. At the same time, female agency and

subjectivity are also announced through the female gaze against limiting criteria, with an intent to deconstruct the ingrainedly unequal structure.

3. Controversies about Chinese Chick Flicks: Feminist Perspectives

Inheriting the filming paradigms of Western commercial works, chick flicks in China have been typified into an identifiable film genre, with some indicating trends of indigenization and the experimental inclusion of more complicated themes (e.g., parent-child relationship, birth tourism, and family affections) into storylines [1, 18]. Although existing research on Chinese chick flicks is still small in quantity, a notable divergence can be observed among the opinions of researchers and critics about their representations of female agency. Some argue that chick flicks are upbeat, provocative, and likely to articulate post-feminist ideas of hybrid identities [19]. For example, in these films, women are often portrayed as ambitious and self-aware instead of being depicted as passive conformists lacking the subjectivity to handle their relationships and life objectives [5]. What's more, from the angle of economics, several studies suggest that the prevalence of chick flicks is a result of the rise of domestic 'she-economy' (the tendency of suppliers to develop products and approach consumers from a female perspective) and can be seen as a positive phenomenon [1,5,20]. As suggested by Li, B., the rise of women's visibility in the market is also a form of female empowerment, reflected by reinforcements in their subjectivity as producers and audiences in the cinema [20].

In contrast, chick flicks are suspected by some as cultural products perpetuating patriarchal practices in which female agency is absent. Apart from critiques of their defiance of women as the childish, preserved, and dependent implied by the word 'chick', there are also comments on their manifestos of female power for simplifying real-life issues, creating ostensible freedom of choice, and constraining women's psychological maturation within the disciplines by male-dominated society [21]. As argued by Li, L. and Li, Y., the inequality of systems often remains unchallenged in chick flicks, in which the entire story is inextricably connected to romance and security given by men [2, 8]. In these stories, the normative power of masculinist cultures and the obedience of female identity will be spoken out by female protagonists [4]. Based on these assumptions, the feminist nature of chick flicks is also doubted by scholars, who view the female subjectivity grown in the rise of the 'she-economy' as a 'consumerist pseudo-feminism' [7]. According to Zhou and Veblen, the purchasing power of women to pay for films cannot transform into their agency in gender power dynamics [3, 22].

4. Film analysis 1: *Go Lala Go!*

Go Lala Go is a Chinese commercial chick flick directed by female director Xu Jinglei. Under the time setting of 21st-century China, it tells the success story of Du Lala, a simple and diligent office woman who grows into an excellent HR manager and harvests romantic love after eight years of effort. The film's narration consists of three parts and is inclined to depict middle-class fantasies other than reflecting the reality of the job environment [2], as most of its content surrounds the development and conflicts in love between Lala and the hero Wang Wei (the senior manager of her department), but seldom presenting how Lala gains experience from occupational practices and reflects upon setbacks on her own.

Whenever she feels insecure in her relationship with Wang, Lala will release her dissatisfactions through luxury consumption, then come back with pretty appearances and be reconciled with Wang again. With a view to the narration, there is a gendered unfairness in the positions between Wang and Lala because the male image is constantly portrayed as calm and unproblematic, leaving the female image willing to please the man as his loyal appendage and hardly gets a response for her worries.

Hence, the portrayal of Lala's agency actually appears vague, as she is still playing the tolerant role of a woman, given the power structure within the aspect of heterosexual relationships.

Through cinematographic tactics and staging, how Lala's agency is oppressed by sociocultural structures can also be seen. Following the paradigms of classic Hollywood films, this film mainly uses long shots and fast-paced, seamless short shots to depict the set. They not only show the modernity and fashion of the metropolitan but also imply the initial position of the protagonist as an inexperienced office woman in the face of a competitive workplace dominated by middle-class elites. For instance, in shots of urban buildings and sweeping over characters in the office, spatially, Lala often appears insignificant, compressed, or distant, feeling anxious about not fitting in [4].

In the multinational company where Lala works, the power statuses of female workers can be revealed in their clothes, makeup, and speech. As a workplace freshwoman, Lala is plainly dressed at the beginning, in contrast with Rose, the female senior manager, Rose, in fancy clothes, wearing exquisite makeup and having her words interspersed with English and business terms. For not being elegant and mature enough like an office woman, Lala's appearance is curiously watched by Wang and her fellows. At this moment, besides the objectifying gaze by the male protagonist, the pressuring gaze from her workmates also occurs as an indirect male gaze performed by females. The reason why these females see her as abnormal is that their habitus has been constructed by and become a part of the androcentric cultural structure to legitimate women's performance of beauty and sexual attractiveness as an invisible rule.

However, with Lala getting promoted to higher positions, her ways of dressing are becoming similar to these 'role models'. On the one hand, this is a sign of personal growth or maturity. But on the other hand, Lala's simulative behaviours just show the disciplining function of gaze and the passiveness of her own agency. She orally manifests a will to be powerful, but in action, is still obedient to the male gaze and the gendered expectations from the structure, managing to become a good-looking and compliant woman to be awarded in relationships and the workplace.

Hence, it is clear that the 'growth' and 'happiness' of women in this film are limited and disciplined by the male-centered discourses behind the narratives. The story is based on an intent to reward stereotypical chick images and 'punish' the able woman, and the failure of Rose to acquire the ideal love is a typical example. Because of her competencies and intersectional identity as an upper-class female, Rose wins the respect of her seniors but is still depicted as heartbroken for her inability to regain Wang's love. The result of Rose not only serves as a foil for the winning of 'silly girls' and the patriarchic values creating them but also comes to show the nature of female growth in this film, in which psychological maturation is only embodied as better economic status and behaviors conforming to social expectations, rather than actions to regenerate self-meanings after realizing the fact of being controlled.

5. Film analysis 2: *Finding Mr. Right*

The second example, *Finding Mr. Right* (2013), is a later chick flick directed by Xue Xiaolu, which explores an emerging social phenomenon of birth tourism (traveling to countries practicing birthright citizenships and giving birth so that the child will be a citizen of the destination country) and cultural shocks. In terms of cinematographic techniques, this film shares similarities with earlier works, including *Go Lala Go* (2010), while its narrative strategies and portrayal of characters are clearly different from theirs, in which gaze and gender power structure are deconstructed, with values of diversity and male-female collaboration conveyed at the same time.

The film tells the story of Wen Jiajia, a single Chinese mother who leaves Beijing for Seattle to give birth, and how she gets along with two pregnant women, Zhou Yi and Chen Yue, in the maternity center. This film not only involves thoughts into real-life issues but also presents the diversity of individual identities against the essentialism of conventional gender structures. Except for the female

protagonist, the images of other supporting roles also indicate the variety this film intends to emphasize [23]. For instance, the social identity, ways of dressing, and personal goals of the female characters in this film are different from one another. In the maternity center, there can be mistresses of plutocrats like Jiajia, well-educated lesbians like Zhou, and middle-class housewives like Chen. Contrary to the innocent and beautiful petty bourgeois ladies in paradigmatic chick flicks, the images of these three women reveal greater fullness and complexities [18], and their individual agency is freely articulated in a secure environment excluded from the sexualized gaze, in which their conversations unfold around topics of life experiences and personal motives, but how they might be thought about by men.

From the angle of narrative strategies, the dual-protagonist setting and a complete depiction of female growth are two notable features of this film. There are two protagonists in this film: Jiajia and the one and only male character, Frank. Jiajia, as the female protagonist, is far from an independent and mature woman. Instead, at the very beginning of the story, she is materialist and aggressive, frequently bragging about her wealth or quarrelling with others. However, as a mother and a former food editor, Jiajia also shows desirable characteristics of optimism and resolution. Instead of creating male images in accordance with the criteria of masculinity, the filmmaker infuses the elements of tolerance and softness into the personality. Frank is a Chinese doctor who leaves for Seattle to work as a driver at the maternity center in order to make his daughter access quality education. Although he is seemingly depicted as a silent yes-man who is despised by Jiajia and his ex-wife for being weak and vacillating, he is also a responsible father who adores his daughter.

According to Li, Z., the expression of female agency in films is composed of two layers: (1) the equal status of men and women and their mutual respect and complement between each other; (2) subverting the narration that places women as pornographic wonders under the male perspective and presenting women's concerns, emotional states, and values in reality [23]. The differences between the personalities of Jiajia and Frank not only subvert the stereotypes of femininity and masculinity but also show the equivalence of their positions, in which Frank helps care for Jiajia in her difficult times during prenatal periods, while Jiajia also encourages and accompanies Frank to face his ex-wife with confidence. The two characters are both flawed and can feel helpless in front of challenges in their lives. Neither of them is the absolute nor the submissive. By presenting the growth of both characters and how they learn from and support each other based on mutual respect, this film deconstructs the occurrence of gaze and the ingrained controlling nature of male-female relationships in cinema.

Back to the self-awakening process of Jiajia, the reformation of female agency and her will to detect and get rid of male manipulation can be observed. Although Jiajia is not gazed at during her time in the maternity center, she is still considered a sexual object by her lover, who sends her abroad to give birth and sees her as a cageling for visual pleasure. After feeling disappointed about a relationship based on money but company, Jiajia gradually realizes the constraints preventing her agency and breaks up with her lover, determining to start a new career to raise her son. As Jiajia accomplishes her redemption from a lowly female oppressed by masculinism to a confident woman, she experiences the mental states of obedience, disillusionment, and rebellion, and finally achieves freedom in both economic and material terms.

With no sexualized representations of the female body, this film places more importance on demonstrating the process of self-actualization experienced by Jiajia, but still clearly expresses its thoughts on the theme of self-identity and ideal love [23]. Other than vanishing the depth of this concept and labeling it as the possession of a perfect person of the opposite sex, this film voices the idea that love is more of spiritual resonance, mutual respect, and trust, based on the premise of being an independent person.

6. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the two chick flicks around their narrative strategies, cinematographic techniques, and staging, this research finds that current chick flicks in China have indicated two different trends of creation. On the one side, like the former example, *Go Lala Go!* some are found inheriting the Westernized paradigms of Hollywood women's films and reproducing the male gaze by submitting the female agency to the power discourses favoring the upper class and men. Despite a verbal manifestation of female emancipation, they tend to place greater emphasis on the visual presentation of the female body (e.g., frequent changes of luxury clothes), other than the thoughts and actions unique to females that lead to actual independence.

On the other side, there are also works like *Finding Mr. Right*, which begins to discuss domestic social phenomena, indicates the presence of the female gaze, and challenges the unequal gender structure by positioning male and female characters in equivalent places, in which the male protagonist is no longer the bearer of look pleased by females, but rather becomes a supporter that keeps pace with the female protagonist and accomplishes his mental growth as she does. By narrating how female characters reflect upon and recover from setbacks in a placid tone, some chick flicks in China come to probe into the living conditions and psychological states of women in the 21st century. To be brief, their expression of feminism and agency tends to be moderate and concrete, with an emphasis on gender equality, unlike previous works that articulate vaguely supported mottos through the characters' word of mouth or ethical sanctions contributing to a win-lose situation.

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