

Male Intellectuals' Gender Narratives in Chinese Left-Wing Films of the 1930s

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Keywords: intellectuals, other, gender, narrative

Abstract: This paper analyzes the gender narratives in left-wing films produced during 1930s through the feminist perspective. Specifically, it explores male intellectuals' gender narratives in these films and how these narratives act as an ideological resource that was instrumental in constructing the subject identity of the proletariat and the national identity under the background of Second Sino-Japanese War. Unlike male intellectuals that were depicted as the propagator of new ideas and the torchbearers of the masses during 1910s-1920s, male intellectuals in the left-wing films of 1930s predominantly featured as playing second fiddle to the proletariat and their dominant roles in the New Culture Movement began to diminish. Subsequently, male intellectuals within left wing cinema were featured as a group that needed to be changed and educated by the proletariat and too, were dependent on the proletariat for their cultural and moral liberation.

1. Introduction

The left-wing film is innately political. As such, there exists a plethora of academic literature that analyses its developmental history and in turn, sheds criticism on its political ideology. However, the question of how gender narratives of different groups in left-wing films act as a kind of cultural code that were incorporated in constructing the subject identity of the proletariat and the national identity; is still worthy of an in-depth exploration. (research problem). The characters in left-wing films can be roughly divided into four groups: the petty bourgeoisie, the working class, the peasantry and proletarian revolutionaries. In the 1930s when the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out, intellectuals also became a group that the Communist Party sought to change or absorb. To symbiotically represent the interests and ideology of the petty bourgeoisie, male intellectuals in left-wing films provide an epistemic space for research for analyzing the gender narratives from a feminist perspective.

The left-wing films detailed in this essay mainly refer to the films produced from 1932, when the Party's film group was established, to 1937, when the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out. Led by Xia Yan, the film group began writing screenplays and absorbing leftist talent within literature and art. In order to intersect with the needs of class struggles at home, it produced a batch of subversive films designed to revolt against imperialism, feudalism and the Chinese Nationalist Party in Shanghai.

2. Literature Review

In the context of the literary revolution of the May 4th period (1919), contemporary Chinese intellectuals were an androcentric group which served as the torchbearers of cultural and ideological values. Xu Jilin, a Chinese historian specializing in 20th century Chinese intellectual history, posits that intellectuals had an unprecedented effect on manufacturing culture from the final years of the Qing to the 1930s. These ideas were often shaped within universities, which acted as dedicated sites to manufacture culture. Modern media institutions in turn, compounded this rhetoric and aided in the widespread dissemination of these new ideological parameters that these intellectuals within universities championed; in turn leading to a new mass organization which was disguised as an organization which aimed to serve the public.[1] Literary works of this period also embodied synchronicities between gender politics and the power of male intellectuals who were often viewed and served as the spiritual mentors of women, in order for their enlightenment.[2]

In *Regret for the Past* (1981) by Lu Xun, the hero Juansheng and the heroine Zijun fall in love. Juansheng instills new knowledge and progressive ideas into the heroine's mind such as family autocracy, discarding antiquated habits and the equality of men and women while she looks "innocent and curious" and willing to be cultivated.[3] In *Mr. Zhang and Mrs. Zhang* (Zhangxiansheng yu Zhangtaimai) by Fei Ming, Mr. Zhang is a progressive university professor, while his wife Mrs. Zhang is an illiterate who has her feet bound (a wholly patriarchal practice and a major symbol of backwardness of China). At the end of the story, Mr. Zhang acts as the challenger of the practice and the emancipator of his wife's life by buying her magic medicine to cure her bound feet.[4]

New Youth (Xin Qingnian) and *Women's Magazine* (Funv Zazhi) became a cultural front (magazines that publish intellectual's articles) of the male intellectuals during the New Culture Movement and the May 4th Movement around 1919. These forms of media explored women's issues such as women's education, family and pseudo freedoms to choose their spouse.[5] The relation between both sexes became one of the most important domains where male intellectuals gained self-identification. These male intellectuals pointed out the 'backwardness' and the 'ignorance' of uncultured women who adhered to traditional ethics, chiefly those who failed to receive a modern education. This was imperative in the process of building a new national consciousness, injecting fresh ideas into China of power and prosperity. Subsequently, women were regarded as existentially heterogeneous and urgently needed to be enlightened and changed by male intellectuals who were superior in terms of both morals and identity.

By the 1930s, the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out and the context of culture, history and politics in China shifted abruptly. When the nation's existence was in peril, the 'enlightening' discourse began to decline and become marginalized which birthed the "national salvation" discourse. Hence, studying the difference between the gender narratives of male intellectuals in these left-wing films and those during the New Culture Movement provides a possibility for making visible the connections between gender discourse and the construction of the subject identity of the proletariat and the nationality.

3. The Theory of the Other

Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* holds the view that women have always occupied a secondary position in relation to men, being relegated to the position of the "other".[6] She defined and discussed the "other" from the female perspective but did not strictly confine the category of the other onto women as her exploration of the other extended to a broader social sphere.

The other is constructed only in relation to 'the one'. For example, utilizing a Hegelian dialect: 'strangers' are constructed and defined in relation to 'natives' in a small town, and the former tend

to be viewed as suspicious. “Othering is the construction and identification of the self or in-group and the other or out-group in mutual, unequal opposition by attributing relative inferiority and/or radical alienness to the other/out-group”.[7] In other words, the other can only exist as it has been symbiotically constructed, maintained and lived in relation to its hegemonically dominant constructor; in which this relation of inferior and superior, dominant and submissive have an entire ecosystem of power relations which compound the relationship further. ‘The other’ is people who have lost their self-autonomy and subjectivity, and been controlled by others or environment, relegated to the position of the object and alienated.

Male intellectuals that emerged in left-wing films were being featured as a group of people who were victims of ‘the dark social system’ created via the Japanese invasion of China. This had stark consequences for the dominant ideology as class-based oppression led to a failure of these intellectuals to harness their creativity and subjective initiative. The period of enlightenment during the New Culture Movement and the May 4th Movement, that espoused character independence, moral and emotional freedoms and individual emancipation, stopped abruptly when the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out. In terms of the gender narratives in left-wing film, the important role that male intellectuals once played during the May 4th period began to decay. Their ideological power began to shift from the center of discourse, toward the side; transforming into marginal man, losing their superiority in both morals and social identity. Male intellectuals were becoming silent in relation to the mainstream and the existing socio-cultural rules and order. As a result, their ontological condition mutated into their very own invocations of femininity; becoming humble, passive and inferior.

4. Gender Narrative in *Children of Troubled Times*

Children of Troubled Times (Fengyun Ernv) produced by Diantong Film Company [8] and *March of Youth* (Qingnian Jinxingqu) produced by Xinhua Film Company[9] stand as salient examples of left-wing films. Both films portray how young intellectuals become the other in an age of rapid change.

Children of Troubled Times acts more like a political fable where male intellectuals in the film are being otherized in a subtle way. The opening scene shows the high buildings and large mansions of Shanghai as well as the spacious and exquisite home of Mrs. Shi, one of the heroines in that film. The fine household items such as piano, the waves in her hair and fashionable dress of Mrs. Shi all connote that she is from a bourgeois family. A woman who is beautiful and dressed in the latest fashion is imbued with negative meanings and is within the androcentric subconscious, believed to exist to seduce men and to hamper their progress. At the same time, the garret that the young poet Xin Baihua lives in is cramped and shabby, yet he is well-dressed and behaves just like a “salon poet”. Baihua is a member of the petty bourgeoisie, earning contribution fees. These scenes attempt to reinforce the difference between Mrs. Shi and Xin Baihua in socioeconomic status and the class identity as well as highlighting the vanity and weakness of Baihua as a young intellectual.

The character of Xin Baihua appears philanthropic as he loosens his purse strings generously, when seeing his poor neighbor: A Feng. His neighbor cannot afford to pay rent, but Xin Baihua injects solidarity into his friend that by stating that “only the poor are willing to help the poor” to identify himself with the proletariat. However, he feels insecure and seeks refuge with Mrs. Shi, once his friend was arrested. He adores Mrs. Shi who is pretty, coquettish and holds a good opinion of A Feng who is poor and unsophisticated. This also embodies his weakness in standpoint, and highlights that Xin has no stable class character and independent class consciousness. He often swings from side to side. Mao Zedong classified the stratum of intellectual as the petty bourgeoisie, when analyzing the classes in Chinese society.[10] However, the intellectuals as part of the petty

bourgeoisie are 'sluggish' and 'backward', inferior both within the political spectrum and in moral frameworks, compared to the proletariat.

Xin Baihua's love story continues down the traditional pattern of 'revolution' and 'love' in left-wing films. Mrs. Shi, a charming woman from a bourgeois family, invokes an aura of amnesia over Baihua, as he almost forgets his nationalism, battles of the motherland and his comrades. However, Baihua finally decides to leave Mrs. Shi until receiving the last letter from his friend before his death. Later on, he enters Anti-Japanese volunteer armies and finally meets A Feng again who he falls in love with. His relationship with Mrs Shi is doomed to end, and only A Feng who is poor, and part of the proletariat can be his eternal partner. As Lenin once said, "Only by struggling against all kinds of backward teachings in a long time such as socialism and anarchism of the petty bourgeoisie can the proletariat be consolidated" .[11] In other words, the subject identity can only be constructed in, around and by struggle. Consequently, it is inevitable that the ideology of intellectuals as part of the bourgeoisie will fail and be otherized. These intellectuals have been constructed as objects as opposed to the proletariat subject and play a passive and subordinate role that ultimately requires transformation via the proletariat ideals.

The constraint on the narrative pattern of left-wing films is that the relationship between the hero and the heroine is determined by their class standpoint. For instance, A Feng's final victory of love becomes a political fable which indicates two things. Firstly, the gradual decay of traditional bourgeois ideas and morals and secondly, that the proletariat will eventually defeat and overthrow the bourgeoisie. The dominant role that male intellectuals once played was weakened through feminizing and otherizing Xin Baihua, and the subjective, powerful and authoritative role that the proletariat played began to rise in these opposing narratives, creating a counter hegemony and reshaping the social conditions and moral imaginations within the proletariat. As a result, the narrative of gender relationship can be used as symbolic discourse in which contributed to the construction of subjective class and national identity.

5. Gender Narrative in *March of Youth*

If *Children of Troubled Times* produced in 1935 is a political fable dealing with young intellectuals and making visible the initial "otherization" of intellectuals, then *March of Youth* (Qingnian Jinxingqu) produced in 1937 acted as a major step toward the feminization and otherization of male intellectuals. To elaborate, the latter film highlighted that political consciousness of the national state dominated and infiltrated the private life (mainly in the field of sexual relations) in a more forceful and salient manner.

March of Youth presents a herd of students who become the followers of revolution due to the national crisis. The politically charged protagonists in this film use the terms such as "nation" and "state" in their commonsensical rhetoric to move and inspire characters from various different class positions. This film deals mainly with Wang Bailin, who is a rich student and comes from a bourgeois family, and a woman worker named Jin Di, who is depicted as pure and independent. Wang is described as weak, and his revolutionary classmate Shen Yuanzhong, who is assassinated, tells him before death that "You are not strong and cannot endure hardship. What a playboy you are! I have introduced the woman worker Jin Di to you, and I hope you can get along with her and do hope you can love her. If you can feel and think like her, I believe you will not let us down."

This quotation constructs a notion that only by following the proletarian woman worker and being subject to their thought can the hero break through his negativity and limitations as a male intellectual. Simone de Beauvoir introduced the master-slave dialectic that is widely considered a key element in Hegel's philosophical system, which holds the view that women tend to be viewed as subordinate to men. However, in a certain historical and cultural context, men are also, to some

extent, dominated by women. The proletarian women are born and revitalized with a class nature that overthrows and denies the status quo that infuses them with initiative and transcendentality.

In this film, quintessential female qualities in traditional Chinese culture such as ‘femininity’, ‘weakness’ and ‘passivity’ have now been integrated as cultural descriptions within the social and psychological boundaries of male intellectuals who are representative of bourgeois ideology and essence. Their dominant role during the May 4th period now gives way to that of the proletarian women. This shows that film has an obvious tendency to otherize male intellectuals, deconstructing the socio-cultural and political parameters of their masculinity, diminishing the power which they hold. Influenced by Jin Di, Wang Bailin, just like Xin Baihua in *Children of Troubled Times*, resolutely breaks away from his family and ‘the stifling grip of the bourgeois’ and participates in the revolution, thus retroactively recognizing his proletarian identity. The narratives of sexual relations in this film are incorporated in the order of the ideology of class in a deeply subtle way.

The screenplays of both *Children of Troubled Times* and *March of Youth* are written by Tian Han, a member of Chinese League of Left-Wing Writers, and the descriptions of the heroines in these two films tally with Tian’s view about emancipation of women.[12] In his view, true and radical progressives are only the fourth-class women; in other words: women of the working class. The hard-working and independent woman workers who hail from poor families in these two films are an exemplary portrayal of the fourth-class women and in turn, this view about women infiltrates and assimilates into left-wing films to establish the subjective position of the proletariat. Ultimately, the fourth-class women are regarded as a positive force of emancipation.

The male intellectuals who are subject to otherization can also be found in other left-wing films. Some examples include: the college student Lao Zhao who cannot find a job is tired of earthly life and even attempts to kill himself in *Crossroads*. [13] Tao Jianbing becomes a victim of the dark society in *Plunder of Peach and Plum*. [14] Doctor Wang as a negative character makes insistent harassment on the authoress Wei Ming in *New Women*. [15] There are few intellectuals who still serve as a moral and political arbiter in left-wing films, but male intellectuals’ dominant and superior position in left-wing films have diminished rapidly after the reframing of workers and the proletariat who become heroes and revolutionaries in these films.

However, the feminization of male intellectuals does not necessarily lead to the rise of women. This is because the nation itself is still deeply paternalistic at the top, and women continue to subordinate themselves to the authoritative hand of the paternalistic state. The feminization of the narratives of male intellectuals and their subsequent otherization via these new discourses that have reshaped political femininity illustrate the obstructive nature of femininity in the violent revolution.

6. Conclusion

Some of the very first elements of the feminization of male intellectuals occurred within left wing cinema. Their masculinity could only be redeemed symbiotically, by falling in love with a revolutionary proletariat woman with the purpose of establishing their subject identity in history. In other words, these male intellectuals were saved and reissued their moral and existential identities by these working-class women. When the nation's existence was in peril, the proletariat, who were born of humble origins and possessed an innate fighting spirit that was revolutionary nature, was more urgently needed. Male intellectuals were gradually viewed as representative of the petty bourgeoisie who were weak and infirm of purpose.

In these left-wing films, there are clear instances of where masculinity becomes inverted, indicating male intellectuals being ‘passivized’ and ‘otherized’. To some extent, this secretly hides the truth that the male-dominated culture was designed to inhibit females since the narratives in the films were by nature aimed at belittling femininity and attaching negative meanings to it. The

negative narratives of male intellectuals have already left clues to directly give negative meanings to female intellectuals in mainstream media after the founding of the People's Republic of China.

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