

# ***Explore the Chinese Feminism Breaking Through by Analyzing the Unconventional Images of Female Roles in the Movie Buddha Mountain***

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**Abstract:** In the twentieth century, Chinese females' social position seems to be enhanced. In fact, because of the problem of development of Chinese history, more and more potential threats for females occur. In order to revolt against the oppression from the males and society, Chinese female directors display the description of unconventional images of female roles to the public, as in the case of the movie *Buddha Mountain*. By analyzing the movie *Buddha Mountain* created by the female director Li Yu, the author finds that Li Yu used imagery, camera language, and queer theory to show the female characters' unconventional images and thereby going against the patriarchal society. From the study, the author indicates that if there will be more and more female directors like Li Yu appears, the females' power in Chinese society could be equal as males' in one day, as the public film communication promoted by movie of feminism.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Film study, Status of Chinese women, Unconventional images of Chinese females.

## **1. Introduction**

From the past origin of Chinese history to the present day, Chinese shifts from the matriarchal society to the patriarchal society. In the process, female gods gradually become female slavers, as feudal thoughts, especially Confucianism, slowly permeate. In the present day, females not only encounter dilemmas in the family, but also in their jobs. Such change of female position is also projected into the change of Chinese film. To be specific, the first Chinese movie *Dingjun Mountain* created in 1905, which is the time for modern China. All the major protagonists in the movie were males. Once the movie occurs in female images, the females are viewed as men's sex slaves [1]. In the 1920s, the first female director Xie Caizhen's film *An Orphan's Cry* came out, this was the first time female autonomy was displayed to the public, though the female protagonist returned to the family with their husband. The film not only described the reality and traditional images of women, but also indicated the awakening of female autonomy in Chinese society. When the time comes to the early 21st century, more female directors and female works are appearing in the film and television market.

One of the outstanding female directors is Li Yu. In the study, the author studies the non-traditional images of female roles described by female director Li Yu through contemporary China by analyzing the imagery, camera language, and the queer theory used in the movie *Buddha Mountain*.

Such study critically discusses how the development of feminism in Chinese film and the awakening of female consciousness are represented behind the film. In order to promote the Chinese females' position in society, the Chinese need more and more similar female directors appear, which is also the essential significance of the study analysis for the contemporary female director's movie.

## **2. Chinese Female Traditional Behavior**

The social status of Chinese women from ancient times to the present can be seen in various traditional female images.

### **2.1. The Social Status of Women in Ancient China**

From the beginning of the Chinese culture, the female position is higher than anyone, because the early Chinese culture is Matriarchal society and views the mother as the god. Then, the image of the god of the female gradually becomes the lower level, which is the "female host". This is because the contradiction of different tribes in ancient China occurred, and the physical advantages of males slowly appeared. Finally, at the end of ancient Chinese culture, female was just viewed as females without any praise. A large number of restrictions on women also followed. The final stage also makes the female transition to the stage of "female slaves" [2]. The example in the ancient Chinese Confucian work *The Book of Rites* shows that "A woman is someone else's appendage. When she is young, she belongs to her father and brothers. When she grows up, she belongs to her husband. When her husband dies, she belongs to her son. [3]"

### **2.2. The Social Status of Women in Modern China**

Female social status in modern China could be showed by table manners. In fact, the modern female was now allowed to have a meal with a male at the same table. There was a strict system of hierarchy and females were on the lowest level in such hierarchy [4]. In addition, there were lots of corrupt customs on female, like the foot binding, and such customs originate from the ancient social ideal, Confucian thoughts, for female and were full of the male gaze.

### **2.3. The Social Status of Women in Contemporary China**

#### **2.3.1. Family Dilemma**

Because of the long traditional image of females, contemporary women still place of obedience. Most stereotypes of women are good wives and good mothers, and caring for husbands and children [5]. Compared to males, females have much stronger family bonds at any time. As a result, females are usually believed to be understanding wives and loving mothers, without self-awareness.

#### **2.3.2. Job Dilemma**

Still since the traditional thoughts are ineradicable, females were believed that their main responsibility is to assist males and reproduction, instead of chasing their own value. Meanwhile, anti-employment discrimination law is not completed in China, which causes that the wage for male and female in the same job is even not same [5]. Due to the wealth gap between the males and females, the rights of females are largely weakened and placed in the positions which are dominated by males.

## **3. Using the Imagery and Camera Language**

Female director Li Yu shows the unconventional image of females in the Chinese millennium era by using imagery and camera language.

### 3.1. Imagery

#### 3.1.1. Trains and Rails

In the section on the status of females, the author mentioned that women were always viewed as slaves of the family. In the film, Nan Feng has a difficult relationship with her parents, with her father drinking heavily and abusing her mother. This traditional era and family background are in stark contrast to the train which symbolizes freedom in the film [6]. This is a break from the traditional female image constraints.

#### 3.1.2. Buddha Temple

The most pertinent one could be the Buddha temple. The Buddha temple just symbolized the characteristic of the millennial era in China and the situation of the ruin was the situation of the protagonists. After the Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008, Buddha temple collapsed and got alone in the mountain. In this time, female roles were all in a miserable and hopeless situation. For example, Nan Feng cannot get out of her father's shadow and incapability and irresponsibility to the family. The temple somehow meant the destruction in this period [6]. Then, Mrs. Chang with Nan Feng and her friends helped the temple master to recover the ruin successfully. All the rough waters returned to calm accompanied by the rekindling of feminist power in the Chinese millennial era. Consequently, the symbol of the Buddha temple became the detachment of the past and hope of rebirth [6]. That is an unconventional image for a female on the screen.

### 3.2. Tools of Camera Language

#### 3.2.1. Close-up View

The closing technique has become one of the most important techniques in cinema. This technique allows the film to show the detailed facial expressions of the characters, allowing the viewer to experience the inner experiences of the characters [7].

The other important female character in *Buddha Mountain* is Mrs. Chang. She seems like the opposite characteristics of Nan Feng. At the beginning of the movie, she is old-fashioned and mean toward Nan Feng and her friends. This is because she had been grieving over the unexpected death of her son due to the car accident and did the same thing, which was that came back to the car encountering the accident and belonging to his son. She never accepted and believed her son died. Li Yu usually used the close-up view of Mrs. Chang. Such a way seems to enlarge the character's emotions, such as sadness. The emotion also makes the audience have the same feeling as Mrs. Chang.

In the final part of the movie, Mrs. Chang built a kindred relationship with Nan Feng and her friends and went to the Buddha temple with them. Mrs. Chang talked all night with the temple master and it seemed like that the heart knots of the death of son were untied. On the second day, Mrs. Chang stood on the edge of Buddha Mountain and waved to the children. Nan Feng really felt happy that Mrs. Chang could release her stress. However, just for a moment, Nan Feng turned back to find that Mrs. Chang had disappeared. All the shots in this part were also the close-up view of characters and with shake to embody the complex feeling. That is, Mrs. Chang may never let go of the past and her son, but she still had the courage to confront the fact and made life and death coexist, which could also be a kind of unconventional image of females. It's worth noting that Mrs. Chang is the representative of the type of main females in Chinese millennial era.

### 3.2.2. Handheld Camera

In order to restore reality, the use of handheld cameras greatly enhances this sense of realism, strengthens the emotions of the characters, and enhances the connection with the audience [8].

With the female protagonist Nan Feng as the main body, the whole film has 3 scenes in which Nan Feng comes to the train track to let loose, 1 scene in which she escapes by car, and several scenes with trains, rails, suspension Bridges and cars. Once one of these scenes appears, director Li Yu would use the handheld camera. Combining the symbolization of train and track, the handheld camera used in these scenes enlarges Nan Feng's desire for freedom.

From the perspective of audience, there is a strong connection for audience to empathize with Nan Feng's desire to break the traditional rules, like female can just stay at home and serve for all the male in the family [3]. At the time, the audience would be Nan Feng, a girl bravely chasing the freedom of life.

### 3.2.3. Gaze

The camera is the primary visual focus of the film, and the director uses the camera as his eyes to gaze, and the way the camera looks reflects the consciousness the director wants to express [9].

In *Buddha Mountain*, there are constantly scenes of women looking into the mirror, which is a kind of female self-gaze.

At the beginning of the movie, Nan Feng is applying makeup in front of the mirror. In this process, Nan Feng used cosmetics to gradually cover up his original appearance. In her self-gaze in the mirror, Nan Feng constantly shapes a confirmation of the value of his own identity. In fact, the process accords with Nan Feng's state, confused and numb, at the beginning of the movie. Another scene of the mirror is when Mrs Chang stands at the front of the mirror and commits suicide. Actually, Mrs. Chang suicide for her son, also a male character. This is in contrast to Mrs. Chang who calmly accepted her fate in *Buddha Mountain* in the later period. In this scene, the gaze of camera is from the back of Mrs. Chang and toward the mirror. The way helps the audience and Mrs. Chang keep the same emotional state. Just like Luce Irigaray said in book *Speculum of the Other Woman* that since men possess the reflective side of the mirror, then women are the repressed train of the mirror. They are the lack of reflection, the inability to reflect; they are the back of the reflection, the dark coating that allows the transparent glass to become a mirror [10].

## 4. Analysis of Queer Theory in the Movie *Buddha Mountain*

In the 1990s, queer theory believed that people have a variety of possibilities in sexual behavior and sexual orientation, and the theory did not restrict homosexual and heterosexual identity, but recognized homosexual or alien sexual behavior, which had an impact on heterosexual hegemony and even patriarchal society [11].

### 4.1. Queer Theory and Chinese Movie

When Western Queer films were popular, the earliest film translation articles on queer theories in China was an *Introduction to Western Queer Films* translated by Huo Cun in the third issue of *World Film* in 1998 [12]. Subsequently, more queer movies appeared in China, like *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) directed by Li An, *Happy Together* directed by Wong Kar-wai, and *Farewell My Concubine* directed by Chen Kaige.

However, all the movies at the time almost were directed by male directors and the main characters were all males. Until the early 21st century, some queer movies involving female characters appeared, and the first female director who directed the queer movie is Li Yu, the director of *Buddha Mountain*,

too. Although the movie *Buddha Mountain* could not be defined as queer movie completely, the sequence about queer theory was also displayed in the movie. Such queer theory for the female character Nan Feng is also another way to break traditional female images in Chinese culture.

#### 4.2. Queer Theory in *Buddha Mountain*

Here is a typical scene in the movie. As a girl, Nan Feng actively found people who bullied her friend Fei Zao and robbed his money. It was surprised for audience to see Chinese female to confront a group of males by herself without fear. For all the shots in the part, director Li Yu made a close-up view of Nan Feng's face, and always held the camera by hand in order to make the camera could be a little shaky, indicating the unusual moment. Nan Feng just stared and gazed at the man who bullied Fei Zao and used a bottle to hit her head, and then the blood slowly flowed down. After that, she immediately grabbed the woman who was flirting with Fei Zao and hugged and kissed her forcefully. Strangely, Nan Feng kissed the girl exaggeratively and rudely but visually romantically and warmly. The director Li Yu perhaps wanted to critically treat the LGBT and associate with the Queer Theory, which is a field of study that challenges existing traditional ideas about identity, sexuality, and gender. It is essential for Chinese movies to advance. In short, all the behavior in these shots was unconventional from the Chinese traditional perspective of females.

Meanwhile, after Nan Feng passionately kisses the girl in the first half of the film, the male character Fei Zao asks Nan Feng if he is gay, and Nan Feng hesitates for a moment, neither denying nor agreeing, although Nan Feng is in love with the male protagonist Ding Bo at the end of the film. This sequence also shows female director Li Yu's flexible application of queer theory in the film. As mentioned above, queer theory only makes judgment on sexual behavior, not sexual orientation. Nan Feng's hesitation thus echoes queer theory.

Although queer theory is not the main theme of *Guanyin Mountain*, the audience can see the female director Li Yu's efforts to break the traditional image of women on screen. It also allows feminism to really spread effectively in a relatively radical way in a patriarchal society, so that feminism not only stays on the screen, but also makes all real women realize the vanguard female power.

### 5. Conclusion

In the study, the author summarizes the development of Chinese female status, from the female god to the female slavers and finally to awakening the feminism, from Ancient China to Contemporary China. Then, taking the movie *Buddha Mountain* created by female director Li Yu as an example, the author analyzes some unconventional behaviors of female roles in the movie *Buddha Mountain* from the perspective of imagery, camera language, and queer theory.

From the analysis of techniques used by Li Yu, the author assures that the power of Chinese women is on the rise, though social resistance still exists. In response to the research results, the author still needs to analyze more female films and draw more accurate and persuasive conclusions by comparing the films directed by men in today's society. In addition, the author also uses the special perspective of techniques, like the camera language, used by female directors to analyze the unconventional images of women roles in Chinese female director's movies.

In conclusion, the study of the feminism film the *Buddha Mountain* fills the gap in analyzing the behavior and image of female characters in female films according to the development of the historical background.

To make the study more comprehensive and persuasive, the author will analyze different female movies in response to the different specific female dilemmas and more mental genders for different females, making feminism not only the weapon for the females to fight for rights and interests, but also the real social form for females to live in.

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