

The Evolution of Women's Roles and Status in Chinese Modern-Themed Films and Television Shows Between 2014 and 2024

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Abstract: This paper devotes to study the changes in the role status and positioning of female characters in the context of modern Chinese film and television shows in the last ten years. This paper is based on the literature research method, case study, and comparative analysis method. Papers in related fields are studied to analyze the differences in the status and positioning of female characters in film and television works in various periods. In conclusion, this research finds that the evolution of female roles in modern Chinese film and television is a testament to the awareness and appreciation of gender diversity and female empowerment. As society continues to develop, future productions will embrace and celebrate the richness of women's careers and family lives. The film and television industry will continue to challenge and redefine traditional gender roles. The industry's response to audience feedback and the need for more realistic representations of women will elicit further innovation and diversity in the representation of female characters on screen.

Keywords: Cinematography, TV series, Feminism, Gender Role.

1. Introduction

Feminism is a hot topic in modern society. The emergence of feminist ideas in today's culture has led to an increasing number of people concentrating on related subjects. Feminist thought has been rapidly integrated into people's daily lives and the media people have access to daily. Some women's films have attracted much attention in recent years. Discussion of the portrayal of women in them has been heated, but only a few papers have been written on the study of the portrayal of women in women's films [1]. In other words, there is a large amount of research literature in the field of film and television roles, but there is still much to be explored on the feminist perspective on the portrayal of female roles in film and television works. This thesis will use literature analysis, case study method, and comparative analysis to compare the changes in the status and positioning of women's roles in Chinese modern-themed film and television productions in the last 10 years (2014-2024), so this research uses this thesis to supplement the research in this field.

2. Main body

2.1. The Basic Theory of Gender Roles in Film and Television Production

As a sophisticated and multifaceted field, the theory of gender roles in film and television examines how gender roles are constructed and portrayed in movies and how these representations impact viewers' perceptions and comprehension of gender. The study of gender roles in the production of films and television shows has progressively become more complex since the 1970s when feminist film theory first emerged. The representation of women in movies, the structural structure of cinematic works, audience reactions, and socially constructed gender roles have raised interest for feminist film theorists. They claim that “the division of sexes into male and female that is still repeated within films today is unrealistic when contextualized within a social context that has seen an evolution of gender identity [2].” Overall, theories of gender roles in the film focus on how gender is represented, how these representations affect society's perceptions and understandings of gender, and how traditional notions of gender can be challenged and changed through cinema. Research in this field has expanded to include a broader range of theoretical and cultural viewpoints.

2.2. The Mediums that Film and Television Work Shape and Reflect Gender Roles

Movies and TV series, powerful visual and narrative mediums, have profoundly impacted shaping and reflecting both gender roles. Gender roles in films are usually portrayed through the following techniques and representations.

Movie characters are often given specific gender characteristics according to social stereotypes and norms. The male characters are consistently portrayed as brave, strong, and logical. On the other hand, female characters are consistently portrayed as kind, sensitive, attractive, and lacking in wisdom. Additionally, the traditional assumptions of gender roles are frequently a central theme in movie plots. In the plot, a female character can play the part of having to be saved or supported, while a male character might assume the role of leading or rescuing. Character behavior in movies also reflects gender roles. Male characters may be more frequently involved in combat or serious missions, while female characters may be more involved in family or emotionally related activities. The techniques mentioned above can be illustrated in various movie genres. For example, in action movies, males usually have muscular bodies and play the hero role in finishing impossible missions. At the same time, females are always charming and attractive, playing weaker roles in the whole process. The characteristics are evident in the science fiction movie [3] *Inception*, with Leonardo DiCaprio starring in the lead role. Cobb, starred by Leonardo DiCaprio, is an experienced professional thief whose specialty is infiltrating people's dreams and conning their secrets. He is a valuable genius in corporate espionage and the leader of the whole dream-stealing team. What is more, Cobb shows a strong sense of responsibility to his team members and his children. On the other hand, Cobb's deceased wife, Marion Cotillard, plays Mal, who sabotages the dream world and persistently obstructs Cobb's mission. Mal's behavior is a manifestation of Cobb's subconscious guilt over his past actions and grief over the loss of his loved one. So, the female characters are always subordinate, even hindering the hero's mission, and play far less important roles in films.

Furthermore, Clothing, makeup, hairstyles, and body language are all visual tools used to portray gender roles. For instance, male characters might dress more formally or authoritatively, while feminine characters might dress more sensually or flamboyantly. Gender roles are also reflected in movies through the sex ratio and character diversity in various aspects.

2.3. Analysis of Television Works

2.3.1. The Criteria and Processes of Selecting Television Production to Investigate

The TV dramas *All is Well*, *Romance of Our Parents*, *Ode to Joy* and *Born to Run* are chosen to analyze the typical images of modern Chinese women because of their profound portrayal of women's roles in the context of contemporary Chinese society and the wide-ranging discussions they have aroused among viewers. These works reflect women's status in the family, culture, and workplace and highlight the multiple challenges contemporary women face. In addition, these TV drama series also show the awakening and growth of women's self-awareness in interpersonal, family and relationships with males. The following are the criteria and process for selecting these television drama series.

Social impact: all these dramas provoked buzz on social media when they were released. All of them received high audience ratings. *Romance of Our Parents* was watched by 545 million viewers, with an average rating of 2.43% and an average viewership share of 6.44% on the national network for the whole drama in 2014, according to CSM [4]. *All is well* scored at 7.7(Out of ten), while *Born to run* scored 7.5 (out of ten) among all watchers, according to Douban [5]. After the airing of *Ode to Joy*, the single-day broadcast volume broke 680 million, the total broadcast volume exceeded 10 billion, the drama title was mentioned more than 2,366,000 times, and the topic search exceeded 780 million [6]. The high scores and high audience ratings indicate that these TV series reached a broad audience base and had a particular impact on society.

Relevance to the theme: The four television shows explore women's roles and problems in the home and office, offering information and room for in-depth discussion.

Character diversity: Character diversity is aided by each drama's female characters' unique personalities, histories, and plots. This helps to illustrate the diversity of perceptions of women. They all depict distinct historical contexts and offer various angles on how Chinese women's position has changed. In addition, they illustrate China's particular conception of gender roles and the family, which contributes to understanding the unique cultural perception of women in China.

2.3.2. The Analyses of Types, Characteristics, and Changing Trends of Women's Roles

In analyzing the main female characters in the TV series *All is well*, *Romance of Our Parents*, *Ode to Joy*, and *Born to Run*, this research dives into three aspects: social status and family characters, women's characteristics, and the changing trends in these dramas.

Social status: Su Mingyue, stars Yao Chen, in *All is Well* is an able woman in the workplace, and her image represents the independence and self-realization of modern women. Female characters in *Romance of Our Parents*, such as Anjie and stars Mei Ting, show the women in the last century's transformation from traditional to modern, reflecting the multiple roles of women in the family and society life. The five female characters in *Ode to Joy* all have their distinctive characteristics, including Andi, Fan Shengmei, Qu Xiaoxiao, and Qiu Yingying, who represent the image of women from different social classes and personalities. Female characters in *Born to Run*, such as Cheng Anxin and Zhao Xiufang, show stories of mother-daughter relationships and their distinctive personal growth.

Characteristics: Su Mingyue is characterized by her professional success and family conflicts, and her portrayal shows how modern women are vital in the workplace and vulnerable at home. Anjie is characterized by her combination of traditional virtues and modern awareness, and her image reflects the supportive role of women in the family and personal growth. The female characters in *Ode to Joy* show the diversity of urban women who face challenges in the workplace and emotionally while

pursuing personal happiness. The female characters in *Born to Run* explore intimacy, self-identity, and life challenges more.

Changing Trends: From *Romance of Our Parents*, *All is well*, *Ode to Joy* to *Born to Run*, the portrayal of female characters tends to be more diversified and solid, and they are no longer just an appendage of the family but have their independent pursuit of life goal and their self-value realization. The status of female characters in TV dramas has gradually increased, and their storylines are richer, no longer a single emotional or family role, but with their own professional lives in the workplace and personal lives in relationships with family and lovers. Also, with society's increasing emphasis on gender equality, female characters are portrayed more positively in TV dramas, showing more initiative and problem-solving ability when facing challenges that previously only belonged to males' characteristics.

The female characters in these dramas not only reflect changes in society's expectations and perceptions of female roles but also show women's self-realization and growth in different areas of life. Through the stories of these characters, audiences can see the multiple faces and unlimited possibilities of women in modern society.

2.4. The Analysis of Society Factor

With the progress of society and the development of culture, the image of women in film and television has experienced a transformation from traditional to modern. Early Chinese film and television often portrayed women as simple and virtuous. They usually focus more on the traditional Chinese image of women as wives or mothers, and they must depend on other men as good wives and mothers. For example, the family drama *Romance of Our parents*, broadcast in 2014, and its entire social setting in 1950s China. The whole shows the changes in society from the 1950s to the 1990s and the growth of the characters in the story. The female protagonist, An Jie, is a capitalist young lady who has been raised in a respectable environment and desires for a good love like in literature. But due to the developmental changes in society, she meets her husband, Jiang Defu. Jiang Defu is a customs officer who was born poor but grew up young and talented. An Jie's profile is in dramatic contrast before and after their marriage. Although she lives a blessed life as well, she no longer lives a life of luxury as she did before but is more considerate of reality. She raised a total of five children, which reflects her contribution to the family and is a symbol of the status of the female role in the social background of the time. Women of that era were more likely to stay home to raise their children and do the housework. Their image of being hard-working, simple, and responsible was deeply embedded in people's hearts. As time moves forward and society progresses, female characters are represented in film and television with different images and richer identities. For instance, the urban women's drama *Ode to Joy*, which aired in 2016, the whole drama is about five girls from different families meeting and getting to know each other and helping each other to grow up together. The five women in the play represent the different environments in which they grew up, resulting in various personalities and different ways of dealing with people. In the play, An Di is a senior business elite who has returned home from a prestigious overseas university, and she is very organized in all her dealings such an independent and self-reliant female characterization is rarely seen before this. Fan Shengmei in the drama is a very discussable character: her family of origin is a typical representative of a type of Chinese family, this kind of patriarchal family is not uncommon in China. "Preference for boys over daughters" is a long-term and widespread social phenomenon in China and even in the whole human society. As early as the Zhou Dynasty, the gender difference between "making the joy of the Zhang" and "making the tile happy" has been accepted by society. Chinese women's social standing has fluctuated throughout history. Women enjoyed some social position and freedom throughout the era of civilization and opening, but "preference for boys over daughters" pervaded every aspect of feudal society and dominated the majority [7]. This kind of family of origin

always binds Fan Shengmei, who goes to the big city alone to fight for her life, and whenever she earns money, her mother immediately asks for that money. Her family always made all kinds of unreasonable demands on her under the banner of forgetting her parents if she couldn't have a good life, and then finally gave all the benefits to her brother. Her brother could always easily get the money and all sorts of favors, but despite the favors he got, he would still keep mentally oppressing Fan Shengmei all the time. The character of Fan Shengmei in the play shows that she wants to find a man with power and influence that she can rely on, and she believes that only in this way will she truly be able to get rid of this mental torture. This phenomenon still exists in real life. Many girls, even when they grow up and have their jobs, are still mentally controlled by their patriarchal families of origin. In the play *All is Well* aired in 2019, the female main character Su Mingyu also has a patriarchal family of origin. But unlike Fan Shengmei, she knows she doesn't have to rely on any male she can get by just as well. She left her family at the age of 18 to make a living on her own. Because of her mother's strong patriarchal values, she became more independent, and she knew what she wanted. Even though she has become a good woman, she lives under the mental control of this strong patriarch. Chen Ruohua from *Born to Run*, which aired in 2024, is also a good example. However, she doesn't want to be completely controlled by her family's patriarchy, as several of the previously mentioned female characters are. In her case, the authors see another big influence in today's society. Ruohua grew up desiring her mother's approval because her mother focused on her brother. An unexpected car accident took her brother's life, and she wants to help her mother get over the loss of her brother, but she also hopes that she can shift her focus a bit on herself. While her mother focuses entirely on Ruohua, she feels a massive pressure to finally understand why her brother told her how much he wanted to run away from their mother during his lifetime. Their mother, Zhao Xiuli, is an atypical traditional Chinese parent. They always feel that they have given up everything and focus all their attention on their children. They want to keep an eye on their children all the time, and they believe that if they do this, their children will become outstanding individuals. This behavior is based on the law that people in the lower strata tend to imitate people in the upper strata. In the behavioral imitation of parental educational involvement, parents of low-scoring students are more likely to imitate the educational behaviors of the parents of high-scoring students to achieve an educational outcome consistent with that of the imitated object. In the process of imitation, parents imitate the appearance rather than the idea, emphasize too much the relationship between learning input and performance, and think that “the more you learn” will lead to “higher scores”, and thus transform pre-study before class into “over-study” and after-school practice into “over-study”. This kind of superficial imitation hopes to improve test scores by overloading students with training outside the classroom, doing more and more practice, etc. They urge their children to invest more time and energy in learning, which is equivalent to parental involvement in education and continuous sharing and imitation of iterative heterogeneity into the ‘Tiger Parenting’ educational behavior [8]. Zhao Xiuli wants Ruohua to get married and have children as soon as possible, but Ruohua prefers to have her own career. After much conflict with her mother, Ruohua finally escapes her mother's control and finds a career that she truly loves and establishes herself in the big city. The character of Ruohua shows that women can rely on no one and escape all the control that society has over females. These themes in film and television also show that while women are becoming stronger, they are also being influenced by the context of society.

2.5. Audience Comments

2.5.1. Audience's Perceptions of Female Characters

Through browsing and checking the public's comments and ratings on the movie and television productions mentioned above, this research found that the audience ratings of the movie and

television productions with related themes are basically around 7.5 marks. 21% of all evaluators scored 5 out of 5, and 2% of all raters scored the work 1 out of 5 [9]. This indicates that some of these works, which have a unique expression of women, are accepted and recognized by the public. About the evaluation of female characters, many people think that they see themselves in the drama, some believe that it is just a scriptwriter who attracts the audience's attention, and some will think that a particular character is what I want to be. It shows the status and image of women in today's society. Film and television are like mirrors that reflect the fact that women in today's society are becoming more independent and confident individuals. No matter what kind of identity they have, they can always be their confident self.

2.5.2. The Effect of Audience Evaluation on Female Characterization

When the staff of each film and television production makes statistics on the audience's evaluation feedback, this will make the entire production team more aware of what the audience wants to see, what the image of female characters is positioned in the public's mind. It will also make the entire team more aware of the direction of their future creations. In addition, the number of people wishing to watch a movie is essential for estimating movie sales and supplies [10]. The audience's opinion is also critical to the investors. Suppose the audience finds a female character to be considered well-portrayed. In that case, investors will pay more attention to the relevant type of movie when they make investment choices in the future, and they will also be able to profit from it.

3. Conclusion

The portrayal of female characters in modern Chinese film and television has significantly evolved over the past decade, reflecting the broader societal shifts in modern China towards gender equality and the recognition of women's diversified roles. This study has gone through several television dramas with a big societal influence and offered an array of materials for researching how women's status and positioning have evolved in the past decade.

The female characters in *All is Well*, *Romance of Our Parents*, *Ode to Joy*, and *Born to Run* represent woman figures with a diverse range of experiences and identities, challenging traditional social norms towards genders. The social status and family roles of these female characters have been shaped by the cultural background of their times, with each drama providing a unique perspective on the challenges faced by women with totally different social brackets and times. Their professional success, personal growth, and family dynamics have been deeply influenced by the societal factors of their respective eras.

The changing trends in portraying female characters in these dramas reflects a progressive move towards a better living style and situation of modern females. Women are now seen as active attendants in controlling their lives, making choices that reflect their individuality and strength rather than being defined solely by their relationships with men.

Audience reception and commentary on these female characters and the whole series have been largely positive. With audiences appreciating the authentic depictions of women, the high ratings and discussions raised by these dramas reveal that the audience is eager to see more diverse and realistic women figures in both media and reality life.

In conclusion, the evolution of female characters in modern Chinese film and television proves the growing awareness and appreciation for gender diversity and women's empowerment. As society continues to develop and progress, it is easy to anticipate that future film and television productions will further embrace and celebrate the richness and fullness of women's career and family lives, and the industry will continue to challenge and redefine traditional gender roles. The industry's

responsiveness to audience feedback and the demand for more authentic portrayals of women will likely drive further innovation and diversity in the representation of female characters on screen.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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