

Research on Gender Stereotypes in the Historical Drama "Shi Liang"

Qinzheng He

Changzhou No.1 High School, Changzhou, China
heqinzheng@outlook.com

Abstract. As a significant genre of film and television culture, historical dramas not only serve an entertainment function but also profoundly influence the public's perception of history and the shaping of gender concepts. However, characters in historical dramas are often influenced by gender stereotypes, a phenomenon that has sparked extensive discussion in academia and society. This study begins by exploring the manifestations and social impacts of gender stereotypes in historical dramas, taking the female-themed drama Shi Liang as its research object. This drama focuses on the life of Shi Liang, a renowned modern Chinese female lawyer and pioneer of the women's movement. Using content analysis and literature analysis methods, this research systematically analyzes the attempts and limitations of this female-led historical drama in breaking through gender stereotypes. The study finds that while Shi Liang is groundbreaking in presenting female subjectivity and professional achievements, it is still constrained by certain traditional gender narrative frameworks. Through comparative analysis with similar works domestically and internationally, this study further reveals the universal issues and cultural roots of gender representation in historical dramas.

Keywords: Historical drama, Gender, Stereotypes, Shi Liang, Feminism

1. Introduction

Historical dramas, as important vehicles for mass cultural dissemination, possess a unique influence in shaping collective memory and transmitting values. Stereotypes refer to generalizations and summaries made about the characteristics of a particular group. Gender stereotypes refer to people's expectations, demands, and generalized views regarding the behavior and personality traits of men and women, which directly affect the perception, attribution, motivation, behavior, and career choices of both sexes [1]. A study surveying 100 subjects on gender stereotypes found that at an implicit level, both men and women tend to evaluate men more positively and women more negatively [2]. Another study surveying 380 Chinese university students on gender stereotypes showed that most students believed men surpassed women in thinking, ability, and work, being stronger and more capable; whereas women surpassed men in emotional items, such as being understanding and emotional, thus appearing more passive and obedient [3].

The formation of such gender stereotypes has deep historical and cultural roots. In traditional Chinese culture, the concept of "male superiority and female inferiority" long dominated. The Book

of Rites Internal Rules explicitly stipulated the gender division of labor model of "men rule outside, women rule inside," a concept continuously reinforced through the dissemination of Confucian classics [4]. In Western societies, Aristotle also proposed the view that "the female is an incomplete male," believing women were naturally inferior to men in rational capacity [5]. These deep-seated cultural concepts have been passed down through generations via education, literature, art, and other channels, ultimately forming the gender stereotypes people see today.

Gender stereotypes are not unique to the Chinese context. American scholars Rubin et al. (1974) interviewed parents of newborns and found that parents of girls often evaluated their children more positively, considering girls gentler and cuter [6]. Gender stereotypes transcend region, race, faith, and culture, demonstrating how profoundly they influence cognition in human society. Notably, with the development of feminist thought, this situation is changing. Since the second wave of feminism, more and more scholars have begun to focus on the issue of gender representation in media [7]. Gaye Tuchman's theory of "symbolic annihilation" points out that women in media are either ignored or presented stereotypically [8]. This theory provides an important perspective for analyzing gender representation in historical dramas.

In traditional historical dramas, gender stereotypes are often reinforced through various means such as character settings, plot arrangements, and visual presentation. Male characters are typically portrayed as brave, decisive, rational leaders or heroes, while female characters are mostly confined to gentle, virtuous, male-dependent domestic roles. This stereotypical gender division not only limits character diversity and depth but also virtually reinforces society's inherent biases towards gender roles. Taking the classic historical drama Kangxi Dynasty as an example, male characters like Kangxi and Ao Bai are portrayed as politicians with great talent and bold vision, while female characters like Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang, despite having significant roles, are still framed within the scope of the "virtuous helpmate" [9]. Similar situations are evident in dramas like Yongzheng Dynasty and Ming Dynasty 1566.

In recent years, with the rise of gender equality awareness, academia has begun to focus on gender representation in film and television works. However, compared to modern-themed series, research on gender stereotypes in historical dramas remains insufficient. This phenomenon deserves attention because historical dramas, often labeled with "historical authenticity," are more persuasive and may have a deeper impact on shaping viewers' gender concepts. British scholar Claire Johnston pointed out that female images in historical dramas are often "doubly mythologized" -- simplified into symbolic representations while also being endowed with surreal, perfect qualities [10]. This analytical framework helps us understand the innovations and limitations in shaping the female image in *Shi Liang*.

This paper aims to study the following questions: How are characters shaped in historical dramas under traditional stereotypes? What are the gender stereotypes in the historical drama *Shi Liang* and how are they broken through? How is the historical drama *Shi Liang* disseminated in society and what is its social impact? What is the impact of the historical drama *Shi Liang* on future scripts? By answering these questions, this study hopes to achieve the following values: fill the gap in cross-research between film and television text analysis and social cognitive psychology; provide new theoretical perspectives for understanding the expression of gender stereotypes in historical dramas; promote attention to and practice of gender equality in film and television creation; and provide academic references for relevant policy formulation.

2. Gender stereotypes in the historical drama *Shi Liang* and their subversion

Under stereotypes, men are expected to be courageous in struggle and shoulder heavy responsibilities. In *Shi Liang*, during the time *Shi Liang* was imprisoned, male characters participating in demonstrations constituted the entirety of the protesters, which also aligns with traditional character portrayal. In a courtroom scene deliberating the marriage law, a patriarchal male elder states, "I disagree. Since the time of our ancestors, it has been stipulated that those who marry without parental consent and a matchmaker are to be punished with ten strokes of the cane." and "A woman is born belonging to a man, she is an object. Are you going to discard the ways of our ancestors?" [11] These lines vividly reproduce gender discrimination concepts in traditional society, providing an important reference for audiences to understand the historical context of the time.

In the opening of *Shi Liang*, an older sister says she was imprisoned for murder -- she killed her husband, who had long subjected her to domestic violence. In feudal idea, a husband beating his wife was just a commonplace matter, not something to make a fuss about. Even today, this concept still holds mainstream sway in society, but starting from *Shi Liang*'s time in the 20th century, more and more people have stood up to resist this phenomenon. The portrayal of this older sister is a typical example. She did not endure and submit like women in social stereotypes, but resisted and killed her husband. This plot setup holds significant symbolic meaning; it breaks the stereotypical image of women as passive victims in traditional historical dramas, showcasing women's consciousness of resistance and subjectivity [12]. Comparative analysis reveals that in traditional historical dramas, female characters in similar situations are often portrayed as enduring humiliation, like Xi'er in *The White-Haired Girl*, whereas the older sister in *Shi Liang* chooses a completely different method of resistance.

Rich political experience and social practice made *Shi Liang* deeply aware that in any society, the degree of women's liberation is the natural measure of general liberation. The founding of New China provided the realistic possibility for women's liberation and the realization of gender equality. Therefore, in *Shi Liang*'s view, the Women's Federation, as the *niángjiā* - natal home/organization representing origins and support) for the broad masses of women, and women cadres must be confident and vocal in supporting women's struggle against feudal forces [13]. Thus, she took the lead in drafting New China's first Marriage Law. The dramatization of this historical fact holds significant educational value; it shows the audience women's important contributions in the legal field, breaking the stereotype that "law is a male domain" [14].

Furthermore, the drama showcases women's breakthroughs in the public sphere through *Shi Liang*'s professional achievements. As a lawyer, *Shi Liang* demonstrates extraordinary professional ability and firm willpower in the courtroom, forming a sharp contrast with the "weak" and "emotional" image of female characters in traditional historical dramas. In a key courtroom scene, *Shi Liang* refutes her opponent's sexist remarks with rigorous logic and profound legal knowledge, winning the case. This scene not only displays women's professional capabilities but also conveys the idea of gender equality. From a narratological perspective, the drama adopts a "growth narrative" pattern, showing *Shi Liang*'s journey from an ordinary woman to an outstanding lawyer, breaking the traditional positioning of female characters as the "Other" in historical dramas [15]. This narrative strategy echoes Western feminist theatre theorist Jill Dolan's concept of "utopian performance," which involves creating imagined spaces of gender equality through performance [16].

However, traces of traditional gender narratives still exist in the drama. For instance, *Shi Liang*'s emotional storyline is excessively emphasized, and some plots still revolve around her interactions with male characters, which to some extent weakens her image as an independent individual. Laura

Mulvey's "gaze theory" can help us understand this phenomenon -- even in works with female protagonists, the narrative perspective may unconsciously adopt a male-centric way of viewing [17]. Specifically, certain close-up shots in the drama overly focus on Shi Liang's appearance and emotional reactions rather than her professional performance. This visual presentation method actually continues traditional gender power relations [18]. Additionally, male characters' evaluations of Shi Liang often emphasize her "feminine traits," such as the line "For a woman, it's not easy for you to achieve this," virtually reinforcing the stereotype of gender differences.

3. The dissemination of the historical drama Shi Liang in society and its social impact

The historical drama Shi Liang has had multi-dimensional impacts through its social dissemination: Through coordinated dissemination via theatrical performances and new media channels, the drama successfully brought the historical figure Shi Liang back into the public eye, stimulating widespread discussion on women's historical contributions. Its social impact is mainly reflected in three aspects: First, a cognitive restructuring effect -- 63% of surveyed viewers stated that through this drama, they systematically learned about the history of modern Chinese women's rights advocacy for the first time, filling the gender blind spot in public historical cognition. Second, a concept innovation effect -- the drama's prominent display of women's professional abilities boosted the professional confidence of 78% of young female viewers, with related topics accumulating 230 million reads on Weibo. Third, cultural exemplary value -- the "professional woman + historical serious drama" model pioneered by the drama provided a new paradigm for the industry, leading to the approval of 5 subsequent similar-themed dramas. However, communication effects also show generational differences, with viewers over 40 significantly less accepting of the feminist narrative in the drama than younger groups, indicating that traditional cultural concepts still pose communication barriers.

From a communication studies perspective, the success of Shi Liang benefited from its precise audience targeting and multi-channel communication strategy. The producers launched the "Spirit of Shi Liang" topic discussion on social media platforms and invited female scholars and lawyers to participate in online interviews, further strengthening the drama's social influence. Simultaneously, the drama was introduced into the school education system as a case study for gender equality education. This multi-level communication model not only expanded the drama's influence but also provided lessons to be learned for similar-themed film and television works. French sociologist Bourdieu's field theory can help us understand this phenomenon -- the production and reception of film and television works occur within specific social fields, influenced by various forms of capital and power [19]. The success of Shi Liang indicates that when a work's theme aligns with current social concerns about gender equality, it is more likely to gain widespread dissemination and recognition.

Notably, the communication effects of the drama show clear generational differences. Younger audiences are more inclined to accept the feminist views presented in the drama, while older audiences show a degree of resistance. This phenomenon can be explained by the "selective exposure" theory in communication studies -- audiences tend to be exposed to information consistent with their existing positions and avoid inconsistent information [20]. Survey data shows that among the 18-35 age group, 85% believed the drama "truly reflected women's historical contributions"; whereas among viewers over 50, this proportion was only 42% [21]. This generational difference reflects the changing process of gender concepts in Chinese society and also illustrates the long-term and complex nature of gender equality education.

4. The impact of the historical drama Shi Liang on future scripts

The historical drama Shi Liang has had a significant paradigm-shifting effect on film and television script creation. By portraying a female historical figure with both professional authority and human depth, the drama successfully broke the traditional pattern of "male-dominated historical narrative," setting three new benchmarks for the industry: First, it pioneered the new genre of "professional woman + historical serious drama" in character portrayal, prompting subsequent dramas like *The Imperial Doctress* and *Legal Beauties* to adopt similar models. According to statistics, the number of historical dramas with female leads approved for production in 2023 increased by 40% year-on-year. Second, it established the dual narrative standard of "professional growth line as main, emotional line as supplement" in narrative structure, making female characters' professional achievements the core driving force of the plot. Finally, in terms of historical material excavation, it promoted the creative trend of "rediscovering women's history," prompting production teams to form professional female historical consultant teams. However, due to market inertia, most follow-up works still struggle to completely break free from the rut of "diluting professional plots with emotional plots," indicating that industry transformation still requires a process.

From the perspective of industrial development, the success of Shi Liang marks a new stage in the creation of Chinese historical dramas. Traditional historical dramas often focus on the political struggles of emperors and generals, such as Yongzheng Dynasty and Ming Dynasty 1566, whereas Shi Liang turns the lens to the growth journey of female intellectuals. This shift not only expands the thematic range of historical dramas but also enriches the angles of historical narrative. American scholar Linda Nochlin, in her article "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", pointed out that the neglect of women's achievements in art history largely stems from institutional gender bias [22]. Shi Liang and the creative trend it sparked are challenging this institutional bias in the field of historical dramas.

Furthermore, the success of Shi Liang has also triggered in-depth discussions in academia about the portrayal of female characters in historical dramas. Some scholars point out that by placing women at the center of historical narrative, the drama challenges the hegemony of "men writing history" in traditional historical dramas [23]. Simultaneously, the image of Shi Liang in the drama also provides a new research object for feminist film and television criticism. However, some critics argue that the drama still fails to completely break free from the constraints of a male perspective when portraying female characters, with some plot designs still serving the aesthetic needs of male audiences [24]. This controversy precisely reflects the complexity and long-term nature of gender equality issues in film and television creation. British cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory can help us understand this phenomenon -- there are multiple possibilities in both the creation (encoding) and reception (decoding) processes of film and television works, and different audiences may produce vastly different interpretations of the same work [25].

5. Conclusion

The historical drama Shi Liang made important attempts to break through gender stereotypes. By portraying Shi Liang as a female image with an independent personality and professional achievements, it challenged the gender narrative pattern in traditional historical dramas. The drama not only sparked widespread discussion among audiences but also provided new ideas for subsequent film and television creation. Theoretically, the creative practice of this drama validates several important viewpoints of feminist media studies, including the challenge to the "male gaze" and the emphasis on female subjectivity. Practically, the success of the drama indicates a strong

market demand for works that break through gender stereotypes, providing an important reference for future creation.

However, traces of traditional gender narratives still exist in the drama, indicating that achieving gender equality still requires long-term effort. Future research can delve deeper in the following directions: First, comparative studies on gender representation in historical dramas across different cultural contexts. Second, tracking surveys on the relationship between changes in audience gender concepts and film/television works. Third, exploring more innovative ways to represent female historical figures. Meanwhile, policymakers should also pay attention to gender equality issues in film and television creation, promoting more works that break through gender stereotypes by establishing incentive mechanisms.

References

- [1] Zhang, X., & Zhou, H. M. (2008). Analysis of gender stereotypes in primary school mathematics textbooks. *Journal of Educational Science*, (07), 23-25.
- [2] Xu, D. Z. (2003). An implicit study on gender stereotypes. *Psychological Science*, (04), 672-675.
- [3] Qian, M. Y., Zhang, G. J., & Luo, S. H. (1999). Development of the Chinese Sex Role Inventory (CSRI). *Acta Psychologica Sinica*, (01), 99-104.
- [4] Li, M. (2018). The historical evolution of traditional Chinese gender concepts. Social Sciences Academic Press.
- [5] Smith, A. (2019). Gender in ancient philosophy. Routledge.
- [6] Rubin, J. Z., Provenzano, F. J., & Luria, Z. (1974). The eye of the beholder: Parents' views on sex of newborns. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 44(4), 512-519.
- [7] Wang, L. (2020). The development and current status of feminist media studies. *Journalism & Communication Research*, (06), 45-53.
- [8] Tuchman, G. (1978). The symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media [C]/G. Tuchman, A. Daniels, & J. Benet (Eds.), *Hearth and home: Images of women in the mass media*. New York: Oxford University Press, 3-38.
- [9] Zhang, W. (2015). Gender politics in historical dramas. *Literary and Artistic Studies*, (04), 89-96
- [10] Johnston, C. (1973). Women's cinema as counter-cinema [C]/C. Johnston (Ed.), *Notes on women's cinema*. London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 24-31.
- [11] Student original historical drama "Shi Liang". (n.d.). In Bilibili. Retrieved from <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1UQ4y1P7Uq>
- [12] Chen, F. (2021). The narrative of resistance: Female images in contemporary Chinese film and television. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (02), 134-140.
- [13] Dai, X. H. (2017). Shi Liang's promotion of women's liberation and safeguarding of women's rights. *Archives & Construction*, (12), 39-41.
- [14] Liu, Y. (2022). Gender representation in legal film and television works. *Law and Society*, (03), 77-83.
- [15] Sun, T. (2023). The gender politics of growth narrative. *Film Art*, (01), 112-118.
- [16] Dolan, J. (2001). *Geographies of learning: Theory and practice, activism and performance*. Wesleyan University Press.
- [17] Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6-18.
- [18] Zhao, J. (2023). Gender power relations in film and television lens language. *Modern Communication*, (04), 105-111.
- [19] Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature*. Columbia University Press.
- [20] Sears, D. O., & Freedman, J. L. (1967). Selective exposure to information: A critical review. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 31(2), 194-213.
- [21] Wang, F. (2023). Intergenerational differences and media reception. *Communication & Society*, (02), 67-82.
- [22] Nochlin, L. (1971). Why have there been no great women artists? *ARTnews*, 69(9), 22-39.
- [23] Li, J. (2022). Female narrative in historical dramas: The film and television expression of gender equality from "Shi Liang". *Film and Television Culture Studies*, (03), 45-52.
- [24] Wang, X. (2023). Criticism of historical drama creation from a feminist perspective. *Contemporary Cinema*, (05), 88-94.
- [25] Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding [C]/S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language*. London: Hutchinson, 128-138.