

# ***The Resistance to the Male Gaze in Chinese “She Theme” TV Series: A Case Study of The Romance of Tiger and Rose***

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**Abstract:** With the improvement of Chinese women’s economic strength and social status, “she theme” has become a popular trend in film and television. It shows women’s resistance to the male gaze, but there are certain limitations. The “she theme” TV series The Romance of Tiger and Rose set in a unique fictional society that regards females as the primary sex. Taking this drama as an example, this essay analyzes the new form of “she theme” TV series to resist the male gaze. By analyzing the characters’ images, it is concluded that the women in the drama avoid the stereotypical effeminate, fragile and lustful appearance in terms of figure and appearance. The women in the drama are strong, career-minded and occupy a more powerful position in heterosexual relationships. The external images of male characters tend to be lustful and feminine. Additionally, the loyal, sacrificial image of the male in the show conforms to the female audience’s imagination of a rational boyfriend. With its unique social background, the play overturns the social status of men and women. However, once back in the real world, the hidden male gaze remains.

**Keywords:** male gaze, she economy, the romance of tiger and rose

## **1. Introduction**

The long-standing stereotypes of women in Chinese society have made the image of women in TV dramas always present a tendency to be dependent on men. While men are always the center of TV dramas, and their images are always plump and three-dimensional. The long-term male-dominated society is an objective factor that makes patriarchal desires allied with entertainment capital, gazing at women through visual hegemony, ignoring women’s two-way aesthetic demands for themselves and the opposite sex, and forcing women to self-objectify to please male gaze [1]. In this context, women in Chinese TV series are trapped in their family identity, which is emphasized as being someone’s daughter, elder sister, and wife. To fight against the male gaze, there is a type of TV series which is called Tanbi TV drama. Tanbi TV series, most of which are written by women, depicts the beautiful and romantic relationship between men and meet the aesthetic needs of women. The male body becomes an object that can be consumed and watched, with symbolic significance and aesthetic value [2]. However, in this kind of TV series, the male characters are frequently endearing and fully realized, while the female characters are either relegated to the background or diminished and stripped of their position due to a lack of female narrative. In recent decades, women have become the main force in online shopping, house purchasing and car purchasing, and

the economy dominated by female consumption has developed rapidly, which is called the “she economy” [3]. The TV series of “she theme” is developed on the basis of “she economy”, which has the theme of the female spirit, female power and female growth. The emergence and popularity of the “she theme” TV series is the embodiment of women’s resistance to the male gaze by relying on film and television culture. Representative “she theme” TV dramas include the costume drama *The Legend of Zhen Huan*, which is set in the Qing Dynasty and depicts women’s struggle under male gaze and oppression of patriarchy. On the other hand, from basic necessities of life to etiquette norms, to the maintenance of traditional female values, the play embodies the tragic meaning of women’s rebellion against fate in Chinese feudal society [4]. Another representative is the modern TV drama *Nothing But Thirty*. The heroines in this drama are strong, independent and ambitious, but they still try to be the “perfect” girlfriend and the “perfect” wife as the standard to measure their success, which is criticized as “self-gazing” [5]. At present, such “she theme” TV dramas claim to depict a different type of heroines, but they instead excessively emphasize love entanglements, constrain women to the roles of mother, wife, and daughter, and continue to view women as inferior to men.

Nv Zun TV drama is a new type of “she theme” costume drama. This kind of TV drama constructs a fictional cultural time, space and social era in which women are respected, and women’s discourse is the main social body. It solves the problem of female characters being constrained by social reality in other “she theme” TV series and also solves the problem of female characters being marginalized in Tanbi TV series. *The Romance of Tiger and Rose* is currently the only Nv Zun drama which is nationally famous in China, with a cumulative viewership of over 2.39 billion after the last episode aired [6]. This play tells the story of the heroine Chen Qianqian, who is a screenwriter by profession and travels through her own script by accident in which society regards female as the primary sex. Nv Zun TV series is an unprecedented form of TV drama in China’s “she theme” TV series, and because of this, almost no research literature on Chinese female statues TV dramas can be found at present. Based on the unique social background of Nv Zun dramas and past research on female images in “she theme” TV dramas, this essay aims to explore how the images of the characters in *The Romance of Tiger and Rose* counter the male gaze.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The act of gazing is a type of watching that involves the operation of power or the entanglement of desire, as well as subjectivity, culture, ideology, sexuality, interpretation, and numerous feminist topics [7]. The patriarchal culture has focused the entirety of its patriarchal social order, including the male gaze, on women[1]. Foucault believed that the gaze was a kind of viewing of power, and the impersonal panoramic gaze was the eyes of the power and an effective tool for disciplining society [8]. The action of gaze establishes a social mechanism that can be controlled by surveillance. People live under panoramic surveillance, constantly assuming that they are conditioned by the constant, omnipresent gaze. Anonymous power implements its surveillance function perfectly and efficiently [8]. Women’s appearances and behaviors are strictly regulated in patriarchal societies, and the media increasingly focuses on their beauty and physical characteristics as a way to draw men’s attention. The various societal obligations and expectations placed on women can be viewed from a feminist angle as the main watchtower in a panoptic prison [9]. Under the pressure of the male gaze, women demand themselves, monitor themselves, and gaze at themselves with male aesthetics [9]. The gaze on the body and appearance is the most superficial and most basic part of the male gaze. Sensory stimulation is obtained by looking at visual objects, which is only at the level of visual sense. The male gaze can encompass a variety of visual experiences, including the physiological visual experience through the eyes and the technical “seeing” through various visual devices, such as video cameras, and it can also be used to a variety of social and cultural practice

domains [10]. Most women in TV shows have exquisite appearances and flawless physiques. Moreover, in movies and television, women are desired, objectified, and unconsciously observe and evaluate themselves and other women from the perspective of the male gaze. Under the patriarchal gaze and oppression, they self-consciously examine whether they succeed in playing the role of being someone's girlfriend, wife, or mother.

Foucault regards women as the object of the male gaze, but Lacan has a completely different opinion.

According to Lacan's explanation, the subject may be otherized. The object of the male gaze is not always an "other" in a subordinate position but sometimes occupies a subject position [11]. Under the social background of consumerism, the media presents men's bodies to the audience after symbolic processing so that the female audience enters the symbolic field constructed by the media to gaze at men's bodies and make consumption behaviors [12]. On the other hand, the media, guided by women's desires, develops ideal romantic partners for women by portraying men who match the imagination of women's emotional relationships. Driven by desire and sensuality, female audiences can find characteristics that satisfy their emotions from male actors and pay for the male images presented on the screen. Therefore, this essay combines Foucault's interpretation of male gaze in the panorama prison with the anti-gaze phenomenon in consumer society to analyze *The Romance of Tiger and Rose*.

### 3. Analysis

The Romance of Tiger and Rose tells a romantic story with gender as one of its themes. The heroine Chen Qianqian in the real world was a screenwriter. Due to an accident, she crossed over to the script she wrote. According to the plot, women had higher status than men in Chen Qianqian's nation, whereas the hero's nation was the exact reverse. The male protagonist, Han Shuo, was terminally ill, and he came to the female protagonist's country in order to seek an antidote. In the process of getting along with the female protagonist, the male protagonist develops feelings for her and is prepared to risk anything, including his life, for the female protagonist. Finally, Chen Qianqian became the ruler of the Huayuan Kingdom and realized that she should build a world of gender equality.

#### 3.1. The External Images of the Characters

The external images of women represented by Chen Qianqian and Chen Chuchu in *The Romance of Tiger and Rose* reverse the image of women in common Chinese "she theme" TV series. As the princess of the Huayuan Kingdom, the female protagonist Chen Qianqian subverted the stereotypical notion of a princess as being dignified, delicate, and frail. On the contrary, Chen Qianqian's costumes in the TV drama were often heroic and handsome. When fighting against the bandits, Chen Qianqian was wearing a red inner outfit with black leather armor, which looked mighty and aggressive; When Chen Qianqian decided to make close friends with the bandits, Chen Qianqian wore a red dress with a leopard-print shawl, and got a twisted half-high ponytail haircut; When Chen Qianqian competed with Lin Qi, in order to prevent injury, Chen Qianqian wore a fat protective gear, which not only did not modify her figure but also looked like a tank. In the male gaze, women's bodies are disciplined, and the panopticon prison is a classic example of such a mode of disciplinary power [8]. Women's bodies, behaviors, and postures in TV dramas are usually under the surveillance of cameras, and women lose control and dominance over their bodies. In order to conform to the public's aesthetic concept and to meet the aesthetic requirements of men, women in TV dramas pursue fairer skin, slimmer bodies, and more sexy, coquettish, or gentle, non-aggressive outfits [2]. However, Chen Qianqian's external image does not meet the

requirements of the appearance and figure of women under the male gaze. Instead, Chen Qianqian adopted more masculine, unflattering attire, shattering the stereotypes of women as being seductive, delicate, and non-aggressive.

The second main female character in *The Romance of Tiger and Rose* is Chen Chuchu, who is the heroine's elder sister. Her attire, which mostly consisted of dark purple and blue hues, demonstrated her poise, steadiness, and heroism. She was most often seen in two costumes in the TV drama. One set was a dark purple outfit with dark red lips and makeup. The other set was an exquisite deep purple armor with her dark makeup. "Taking white skin as beauty, pursuing a more delicate figure and a harmless young face" is considered to be the discipline of women's bodies under the male gaze in Chinese society [5]. Such an image of women suggests their non-threat, manageability, and simplicity. The requirement for women to be slim and harmless places women in a disadvantaged position, implying that women need to be dependent on men in order to survive. Chen Chuchu's heroic and mature appearance has broken away from the single aesthetic standard of being weak and beautiful, indicating the strength and independence of women.

However, the appearance of the main male characters in the TV drama demonstrates characteristics of lust and femininity. The male protagonist Han Shuo was handsome, young and full of youthful vigor. In the play, he often wore a light-colored dress with a hairpin on his head and a belt that embellished his slender figure. When Han Shuo was injured, his clothes were torn, and the camera showed close-ups of his wheat-colored abdominal muscles many times. In the TV series, Han Shuo's half-naked body and fit figure attracted the attention of female audiences. The seductiveness of the flesh transforms into imaginable sexual yearning and sensuality, causing female audiences to get fixated on the erotic symbols that the nude body represents. The male protagonist's attractiveness satisfies women's need for "beauty" and "desire" as well as their sexual fantasies of men [13].

In addition, the second main male character in *The Romance of Tiger and Rose* is Pei Heng, who was recognized by people in the Huayuan Kingdom as the most beautiful man and was welcomed for his gentleness and elegance. His attire in the television drama was usually light-colored robes, showing a delicate and jade-like appearance. Unlike Han Shuo's strong figure and image, his image was more feminine. In the context of Chinese traditional culture, the conventional male image oppresses women with its outside physique and absolute dominance in strength and power, placing women in a possessive position. Feminine male images like Pei Heng subvert the inherent order of male and female natural positioning (from male to female), social status, and self-positioning, allowing the female to obtain the pleasure of "possession" [13].

### 3.2. The Internal Images of the Characters

The image of women being exploited, discriminated against, dwarfed, and disadvantaged in the real society has been changed in *The Romance of Tiger and Rose*. When Chen Qianqian saw the male musicians were forced to serve others with sex in entertainment venues, she managed to save all male musicians and rearranged jobs for them. Chen Qianqian became the "redeemer", while the male musicians in entertainment venues became the "redeemed". The term "male gaze" refers to both the visual perception of women as the object of male desire as well as the various expectations and demands placed on women in terms of roles in social culture. Women are judged when they behave in ways that do not conform to social norms. In Chinese culture, women are expected to play the role of "the caring wife and wise mother" in the family [5]. Furthermore, since "being ambitious" is a concept that belongs to men, women are expected to stay away from engaging in activities that suggests ambition [5]. The image of Chen Qianqian is the "savior," disproving the idea that women are constantly under the watchful eyes of men, powerless to influence the society or change the status quo, and forced to wait for powerful men to take control of their destiny.

The second main female character, Chen Chuchu, was good at leading troops. Every time there was a war in the Huayuan Kingdom, she would personally lead the troops to subdue the enemy. Chen Chuchu was addicted to the pursuit of power, and her lifelong ambition was to become the lord of a country. By way of the text relating to physical image and the text relating to inner personality, Chen Chuchu deviated from the gender stereotypes of previous TV series by following her unorthodox aspiration. She admired Han Shuo due to his talent in leading a nation. However, her feeling for Han Shuo is not pure affection and admiration but regarding Han Shuo as a sexual resource. Chen Chuchu was characterized as loathing men through her actions after assuming power. She issued a decree targeting men, stipulating that anyone who is disheveled, literate, or even a businessman must be arrested and punished. This implies that men are not equal to females from her perspective. In the Huayuan Kingdom, where female was the primary gender, the competition among women was not only for wealth and power but also for the possession of good-looking, talented, and rare men. Therefore, the male protagonist is the object of Chen Chuchu's gaze and is the "obsession" for Chen Chuchu to compete with the female protagonist.

The male protagonist Han Shuo prioritized his romantic relationship with Chen Qianqian more than the female protagonists, who focused more on their careers. Han Shuo immediately abandoned his original plan to conquer the Huayuan Kingdom after realizing that he was in love with Chen Qianqian. Instead, he became an enamored man who was only considering how to win Chen Qianqian's heart. He pampered Chen Qianqian to the utmost, considered everything for her, and washed Qianqian's feet in front of his maid. The hero is portrayed as an infatuated image that places the heroine first and is even willing to give up his career for the heroine. This kind of dedicated personality fully meets the female audience's standards for boyfriends. Han Shuo's perfect appearance and unique personality fit in with heterosexual women's emotional desire and companionship fantasies for male partners.

Due to the social context of the feminist society, both male and female roles are produced to appeal to women's imaginations and prevent women from being the object of the male gaze. The media provides virtual time and space settings in TV dramas for women who are repressed in real life to satisfy their wants [14]. However, once women return to reality outside the simulated world, they will find that hidden sexism in society still exists [15]. Women's resistance to the male gaze is vulnerable to the collaboration and manipulation of the capital and the mass media, and it can only flourish in a virtual environment. Therefore, women are nearly indulging in the simulated world while feeling confused and irritated, which undermines feminism consciousness and resistance [15].

#### 4. Conclusion

According to the analysis, the external image of the main female characters in the TV drama has changed the stereotyped image of a princess being dignified, soft, and fragile. In contrast, their heroic outfits demonstrate that women are no longer the object of the gaze and that their bodies do not emit any erotic messages. In the play, Chen Qianqian and Chen Chuchu have strong, independent personalities that are career-focused and protective of the male characters. Women no longer compete for pure romantic love; instead, they view males as sexual resources. The appearance of the male characters in the TV drama presents the characteristics of femininity and lust, which caters to women's desires under the background of consumerism. The internal image of the male character is one that satisfies women's emotional fantasies about men by prioritizing love and being willing to sacrifice his career and dignity for the heroine. Despite the fact that fictional, female-focused "she theme" TV series panders to women's interests, as they leave the virtual realm and return to reality, the latent sexism in society still prevails.

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