

Feminist Imagery in Chinese-Language Films: Gender Discourse in Social Transformation

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Abstract: Under the premise of the growing discussion about women's issues in China, this article, based on research on women's images in Chinese films, employs the case study approach to examine three films in the early years of 1950s - *The Red Detachment of Women* (1960), in 1990s - *Ju Dou* (1990), and in modern society - *You Only Live Once (YOLO)* (2024), and literature review based on the development of feminism, film's function as the platform for promoting gender debate, women's issues and female images in Chinese films. It intends to provide comprehensive proposals to produce female roles in films, taking into account the current challenges faced by Chinese women. These obstacles include the emergence and development of women's self-awareness and autonomy in response to societal expectations and stereotypes, as well as the dismantling of long-standing prejudice and sexism.

Keywords: Feminism, Stereotype, Film, Chinese female.

1. Introduction

Patriarchal ideology has existed since the past century. They began to challenge the traditional stereotype wave of Western feminist thinking that has entered China, triggering a deep reflection on women's values, roles, and image and sexist terms such as "female driver" and "sissy," demanding equal rights in society and forming new self-awareness. Feminism and gender issues remain prominent subjects of discussion on the Internet and are critical social themes. Since the 1990s, China's economy has developed rapidly and is still growing. With the improvement of living standards, people's demand for aspects of culture and entertainment has been increasing. Film, as a predominant medium, serves as a vehicle for disseminating contemporary and new concepts [1]. Films from several eras might encapsulate the prevailing awareness and ideologies of their respective societies. The impact of feminist ideology is transforming the representation of women's power, worth, and image in the film, hence challenging established societal assumptions.

In the field of Chinese films and feminism, plenty of scholars have pointed out their views on the portrayal of women in Chinese cinema during a certain period. In 2015, Yun Wei posited that the revolutionary films of New China predominantly depicted revolutionary women as strong, resilient, passionate, magnanimous, and masculine. Nevertheless, in their struggle for rights, women remained unable to evade a male-dominated destiny [2]. Scholar Zhao asserted that feminist films from the 1980s to 1990s disturbed the portrayal of harlots by women in connection to "sex" [3]. Furthermore, Chen Hui's study on the representation of women in 21st-century Chinese romance films indicates

that women lack autonomous identities and predominantly exist to fulfil the emotional requirements and aspirations of men [4].

This article will use the method of literature review and case studies to analyse the change in the image of women in Chinese films to explore the gender discourse in social transformation. Moreover, taking Chinese films as a starting point, this paper aims to break the stereotype and monotonous portrayal of women and their dependence on men for survival under the patriarchal consciousness, enrich the personalities and values of women's image, and strive for a more equitable societal perception of gender.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The development of feminism

As a social movement, feminism has existed for centuries. Throughout history, feminism has seen many waves, each of which reflects the social requirements and demands of women during a specific era. The first wave occurred from the late 19th century to the early 20th century and was marked by the pursuit of legal rights, including the right to vote and education. In the 1960s, the second wave emerged, expanding to issues of social equality, family roles, and more. The subsequent occurrence was the third wave that commenced in the 1990s. Compared to the previous two, it was more diverse, focusing on race, cultural background, gender awareness and identity. The fourth wave approximately emerged around 2012 (now still a subject of controversy) and focused on issues such as gender violence, gender equality, and stereotypes. With the advent of the Internet era, social media and various forms of streaming media have emerged as the predominant channels for communication and dissemination, exemplified by the “MeToo” movement [5].

The definition of feminism has been a topic of discourse among feminist researchers over time. While there have been arguments along the way, it is undeniable that feminism is known as the broader social and political movement to attain greater equality for women, which encompasses a set of beliefs and ideas. Feminism, as its foundational concept, guides and molds the women's movement, which, in turn, exerts influence upon it [6]. Consequently, feminist scholars have formulated several feminist ideas. Alison Jaggar has categorized feminist theory into four groups: radical, liberal, Marxist, and socialist. In contrast, Josephine Donovan divided it into cultural, Freudian, existentialist, Marxist, and radical feminisms. The basic difference is that Donovan has been meticulous in her explicit recognition of the distinctions between the first and second waves, and between American feminists and their European counterparts [7].

2.2. Film as a medium for the dissemination of gender discourse

In the information era, the public may be subtly influenced by various forms of media, including (but not limited to) films, TV, social media, and games. Film is a contemporary medium distinguished by its popularity, dynamic movement, and integrative innovation. These features make it a crucial source of inspiration for the future development of modern media [8]. Consequently, it is imperative to select film as the medium for this investigation of gender discourse and female images in social transformation.

It is captivating to examine the representation of gender in films, as media plays a crucial role in people's daily lives and can profoundly influence their perspectives of the world and themselves [9]. The portrayal of gender in the media influences our understanding of gender roles. The perception of masculinity and femininity, along with the expected conduct between the sexes, can be reinforced by specific gender-related characteristics [9].

An analysis of the highest-grossing films over two decades indicated that women are increasingly portrayed in positions that emphasize intelligence, strength, and independence in more recent films

compared to previous ones. Nevertheless, they remain less well-rounded and less significant than men [10].

2.3. Women's issues in Chinese films

Chinese films seek to explore the interdependent interaction between the individual and others during the filmmaking process, presenting a nuanced depiction of power dynamics, relational transformations, methodological adjustments, and cognitive development [11]. The awareness of women in films has been progressively increasing because of the development of feminism. The concept that female characters are subordinate to males has gradually been eradicated by the passage of time. The representation of female characters is transitioning to a more independent and three-dimensional approach. The demands of female consciousness can be plainly and independently expressed in exceptional films about women, which can profoundly reflect the realities of social life. However, following a period of rapid growth, the development of women's film practices in China has reached a halt. The main challenges include the depletion of creative subjects, distortions in the artistic representation of women's films, and the possible influence of patriarchy [1]. Films ought to prioritize authentic narratives over mere adaptations of literature and catering to mainstream preferences, portraying female characters as uninformed, subservient spouses, and implausible archetypes. Furthermore, to portray the genuine challenges confronting women, many films use tragic scenes to generate pity and compassion from audiences. Although the objective is to consider women, it is also unwise not to highlight their autonomous and proactive qualities. Women are not merely figures in need of rescue; they ought to possess the ability for self-sufficiency.

2.4. Female images on the screen in early China (early 20th century to 1950s), reform and opening-up (1980s to 2000), and modern times (21st century).

The images of women in early Chinese cinema have been categorized by scholars He Jing and Hu Xin into distinct themes. Firstly, there are women representing ethical integration and family reconstruction, often depicted as tragic protagonists caught in bitter love. Secondly, the helpless end of resistance is illustrated through female banishment and a retreat from male assistance. Lastly, the ideal 'martyr' woman embodies an unsurpassed masculine perspective. In pre-1949 Chinese cinema, women were viewed through the male director's lens as mere objects for visual consumption, serving to fulfil male desires, and they often remained speechless and helpless, functioning as symbols of expression and concealment on the screen [12].

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, and particularly in recent years, the role of women in contemporary Chinese cinema has shifted in a more favourable direction. In recent years, Chinese-language films have focused more on women's inner worlds and spiritual quests, highlighting the tension between women's emotions and reality rather than the typical 'good wife and mother' roles. Furthermore, Chinese cinema has begun to reflect on patriarchy by depicting men's responsibilities and roles in the family and society, as well as emphasizing the importance of males forming equal and respectful partnerships with women. It also emphasizes that males should form equal and respectful partnerships with women and pay attention to their rights and needs. Consequently, numerous films endeavour to cultivate a more equitable relationship between men and women by depicting female characters in a more profound, three-dimensional fashion [4].

3. Case Study

3.1. Revolutionary War Film - *The Red Detachment of Women* (1960)

The Red Detachment of Women (1960) is a renowned revolutionary war film in China, depicting the story of a servant girl, Wu Qionghua, who joins the Red Detachment of Women in the 1930s in Coconut Grove Village on Hainan Island. Under the mentorship of Comrade Hong Changqing, a Communist Party member and a representative of the Detachment, she seeks to escape the exploitation and oppression inflicted by the malevolent landlord Nan Batian. During a reconnaissance mission, she shoots Nan Batian indiscriminately, resulting in the operation's failure and the loss of her team. She recognizes that the revolution serves a purpose beyond her vendetta; it aims to liberate regular individuals who are similarly facing severe hardships. Wu Qionghua, the protagonist, is a lady deeply committed to resistance, revolution, and class consciousness. She exhibits the courage to escape Coconut Grove Village, where Nan Batian orchestrates his schemes; she demonstrates tenacity by refusing to surrender after her capture; she possesses the introspection necessary to contemplate her conduct and achieve spiritual growth from her impulsive actions; and she possesses leadership capabilities, collaborating with the primary force to eliminate Nan Batian following Hong Changqing's apprehension. She epitomises the concept of an archetypal and nearly flawless revolutionary. Simultaneously, the film focuses on women, highlighting their value and importance in the revolution. It underscores the equality of men and women during the Revolutionary War, suggesting that women are not reliant on males for their own salvation. Nonetheless, one figure who cannot be disregarded in Wu Qionghua's transformation from a robust yet impetuous woman to a composed and poised company commander is Hong Changqing. Wu Qionghua became a member of the Maiden Scouts under the mentorship of Hong Changqing. Wu Qionghua fled to communist territory with the aid of Hong Changqing and enlisted in the Women's Army to seek vengeance for herself and her father. Hong Changqing can be considered as having set the groundwork for Wu Qionghua's insurrection. Subsequently, they developed different feelings for one another; however, they refrained from articulating them. Wu Qionghua commanded the Women's Detachment to vanquish Nan Batian, driven by indignation and sorrow at Hong Changqing's assassination. Women seem to possess a revolutionary capacity for self-preservation; nevertheless, they are 'rescued' by men who provide guidance. Despite Wu Qionghua's self-worth and individuality in the revolutionary struggle, the absence of significant physical contact between her and Hong Changqing does not negate the inherent male superiority that positions him as her spiritually authoritative leader. It is evident that the women of the revolution, possessing distinct ideals and self-awareness, constitute an essential and crucial component of the revolutionary force; nonetheless, they remain subject to male intellectual leadership. Patriarchal ideology continues to impede the dismantling of leadership dominance over male speech.

3.2. Historical Ethical Film – *Ju Dou* (1990)

Ju Dou is a drama film directed by Zhang Yimou and starring Gong Li, which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1991 and was the first Chinese-language film to be nominated for an Oscar. The heroine, Ju Dou, was purchased into the Yang family at the start of the film, demonstrating that women at the period were simply considered 'things' and 'machines' for reproduction, with no right to their own decisions. Ju Dou, on the other hand, was not a woman who gave up easily. She was resolutely defiant. She utilizes her disfigured physique to pique Yang Tianqing's interest, who has been single for 40 years, and make him fall in love with her, completing her self-rescue. After Yang Jinshan is paralyzed, Ju Dou openly admits her relationship with Yang Tianqing, in contrast to Yang Tianqing's cowardice. Ju Dou, moreover, depicts the ladies of the time

who struggled for their own happiness. She progressed from being the inferior in her relationship with Yang Jinshan to the dominant, or sexually dominant, in her relationship with Yang Tianqing. This depiction of women's sexual autonomy was undoubtedly a substantial contribution to the evolution of feminist cinema [3]. In patriarchal gender relations, men usually dominate sexual relations, and Ju Dou, as a woman, becomes the leader of the relationship, which undoubtedly breaks down sexism and stereotypes in sexual relations. More importantly, the film was made in 1990, and during that period, China's arts and culture industry saw unprecedented prosperity and growth. Filmmakers are breaking away from laws and regulations to pursue greater artistic expression. The representation of sexuality represented a significant leap. Thus, as time progressed into the 1990s, women's notion of sexual autonomy began to emerge in films. Women were portrayed in a more holistic light, challenging the restrictions of the traditional concept of femininity.

3.3. Modern Urban Film – *You Only Live Once (YOLO)* (2024)

YOLO is a contemporary urban film released in mainland China in 2024, adapted from the Japanese film *10 Yen Love* (2014), directed, starred in, and co-written by Jia Ling. Du Leying, the protagonist of the film, is a college graduate who returns home after a brief period of employment and subsequently spends a decade in inactivity, becoming progressively dishevelled, overweight, and betrayed by her spouse and best friend. By chance, she meets Hao Kun, a boxing coach, and after hearing about his desire, Leying falls in love with him and supports his work. However, after being duped by her cousin and loathed by Hao Kun, her life is being tested again. Thus, Leying is determined to improve her people-pleasing yet damaging personality, so she begins boxing lessons and undergoes extensive professional training. A year later, in a boxing bout, she loses to her opponent but completes her change. Leying's temperament is typical of the pleasant kind, with soft-spoken tones and a hunched posture. Following a dispute with her sister, she nonetheless conveyed the house bequeathed to her by her grandmother to her sister, as her sister's daughter required educational support; despite being betrayed by her boyfriend and best friend, she attended their wedding as a bridesmaid due to her best friend's sincere appeal; although she was reluctant to appear on television, she participated in the program to assist her cousin's career, only to be exploited as a means to generate viewership, illustrating that Leying consistently prioritises the welfare of others over her interests. In this film, what the audiences see is that women are simply getting hurt more by giving in, and it's destroying the image of the conventional pleaser. It's also a reminder to pay attention to your own emotions. More crucially, the film demonstrates the shifting of positions between men and women in the binary gender framework. In traditional patriarchal philosophy, women are responsible for attracting males. This is because, in a patriarchal culture, women are not the dominant sex thus, they must draw the attention of men to obtain shelter and a higher standard of living. However, we can see that male boxing trainers work very hard to please female customers to increase revenues. The male-dominated gender structure is reversed here, and men, rather than women, are the focus of gaze and judgment. Nevertheless, there is no getting around the fact that women are viewed as objects with the power to consume. The beautiful man boxing trainer draws more female clients. Women, in this situation, are still regarded as empty-headed, seeking just appearance and entertainment. This is also a stereotype. The film also depicts how today's thought is deconstructing the image of women's conflict in relationships between men and women because of competition for men's affection, commonly known as “female rivalry.” While the film does not refute the cognitive patterns associated with feelings of betrayal by girlfriends and lovers, it does challenge the stereotype of female rivalry, namely the notion that women do not vie for men's devotion.

4. Discussion

4.1. Women's issues in social transformation

4.1.1. Female identity and social role transformation

As China develops and reforms, women's identities and social roles have shifted dramatically, demonstrating more progress and reflection from a female perspective than at any prior time. In their quest for self-identity and self-worth, women are also contemplating the stereotypes associated with gender roles in familial, professional, and public spheres within the framework of society's entrenched gender structure.

The proliferation of knowledge in modern society has laid a firm foundation for the evolution of women's roles in society. Women now have equal educational opportunities as males thanks to increased access to education. Women have begun to explore their skills in an increasing number of sectors, achieving their career goals through higher education and professional studies and entering traditionally male-dominated occupational fields. Economic development has also created more job options for women, and an increasing number of women are entering the workforce in search of economic independence. Women have also emerged as an influential factor in economic development and public affairs. The traditional division of labour between the sexes is progressively being broken down; women are no longer limited to the family; they have their careers, and their self-worth is increasingly being examined. Women recognized that they did not have to be someone's wife to make a living, and their sense of self began to develop.

The self-awareness of women has markedly intensified, resulting in a reorientation of their focus from familial responsibilities to personal identity, hence influencing changes in societal roles within the dual gender paradigm.

4.1.2. Gender equality and empowerment

Despite women recognizing their self-worth and professional identity in the workplace, they remain constrained by antiquated gender notions and biases. The career advancement trajectories for women are generally more arduous than those for males. 33.1% of women experience impediments to their progress owing to their gender, in contrast to only 9.2% of men, and 54% of women in the workforce perceive that they have encountered gender-based discrimination [13]. The progression of streaming media has empowered numerous accomplished women to articulate their perspectives, prompting discussions on experiences of hostility and inequity in their lives while contemplating their underlying causes, thereby assisting other women, who remain ensnared in self-doubt, in discovering pathways to liberation from their predicaments. Numerous women raised in patriarchal households developed resilience; many women who faced academic or professional disadvantages achieved success through personal determination; many women who endured domestic or emotional abuse established their own enterprises post-divorce and uncovered a previously unrecognized sense of self-worth; all these instances motivate Chinese women to confront inequitable circumstances with courage.

Chinese women are advocating against stigmatizing phrases for women, removing slut-shaming, assessing items that objectify women, combating body-harming aesthetics, actively advising the government, and so on.

4.2. The influence of women's image on gender perception in Chinese-language films

Film, being a vehicle of popular culture and a form of mainstream media, has a communicative and instructive role. The representation of women in films also influences social perceptions of gender. Starting with *The Red Detachment of Women* (1960), introduced in this article, the primary character

Wu Qionghua is a female fighter with revolutionary awareness, which validates women's essential roles in the battle. At the same time, it was a way of demonstrating women's strength and overcoming the stereotype of women as shy and weak, even though this was not distinct from male spiritual leadership. In the film *Ju Dou* (1990), the main character Ju Dou is persecuted by the feudal system and loses her independence, but she refuses to give up. She resists and uses her body to entice Yang Tianqing, hoping to find forgiveness and freedom through hidden love and children. This is also a broad depiction of sex' and ethics. Women should have the right to regulate their bodies and the freedom to marry. In *YOLO* (2024), we see a lady who has forgiven herself and found self-worth within the mainstream aesthetic, except it's worth emphasizing that she changed for no one except herself. As an often-betrayed pleaser, she is desperate to win for herself, which motivates her to change. In the film, Du Leying conveys the concept that people live for themselves. It also encourages all women to think for themselves in a male-dominated culture.

In films, the female character has completed the journey from atonement to self-redemption. The image of women in the film serves as a tremendous source of inspiration for the viewers in real life. They not only contribute significantly to the breakdown of gender stereotypes, but they also vindicate stigmatized women, reveal women's potential, and help society better understand women. People's thinking is evolving, and the portrayal of women in films should reflect this.

5. Conclusion

This article focuses on the changes in the image of women in Chinese films as a result of social developments in China, examines the impact of the image of women on the perception of gender in society, and addresses the social concerns confronting women in China. This article examines female characters in films from three different periods, evaluates the evolution of Chinese women's self-awareness and independence in the context of the age in which they were filmed, and raises contemporary problems regarding women's survival and interests.

This work employs only one research method, case study analysis, and includes only three cases. Because there was no in-depth investigation, the study is incomplete and will be expanded upon in the future. This article focuses on the issue of Chinese cinema and feminism, and it intends to provide thorough proposals for the portrayal of cinematic characters, as well as to encourage people to consider the current dilemmas of Chinese women. It is hoped that future films will show female characters more realistically and less stereotypically.

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