

Feminist Perspectives in Contemporary Chinese Media: A Comparison of She and Her Girls and Beyond the Clouds

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Abstract: In today's society, the development and awakening of feminism has greatly influenced the dissemination of mass media and the development of film and television works. The film and media works under the influence of feminism are gradually moving towards two different aspects. The thesis focuses on feminist works in new media, and through qualitative analysis and comparative analysis of the plot structure, character portrayal and audience acceptance of the two TV series *She and Her Girls* and the film *Beyond the Clouds*, which are adapted from the real-life story of China's headmistress Zhang Guimei, who set up a girl's school to help girls to get out of the mountains, the the thesis discovers the different interpretations of feminism and women's strength in the new media films and TV works and analyses the audience acceptance of these two films with the same subject matter. We will also analyse the reasons for the audience's opposite attitudes towards these two works with the same subject matter, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of their impact on the development of the current film and media industry and the public's social awareness of feminism, in order to explore how to build up a feminist work in the new medFeminism, women's awakening, new media film and television, Chinese feminist works.

Keywords: Feminism, women's awakening, new media film and television, Chinese feminist works

1. Introduction

Feminism, also known as womanism, refers to the social theories and political movements that have been created and initiated to end sexism, sexual exploitation, discrimination, and oppression and to promote sexual class equality [1]. The first wave of feminism took place mainly in the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, with the fight for women's suffrage and the establishment of gender equality as its main goals. Its theoretical development is represented by John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of women* published in 1869 [2]. The second wave occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, focusing primarily on gender equality. This period also saw the emergence of feminist scholarship, exemplified by Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 book *The Second Sex* [3]. The third wave began in the 20th century. In 1992, Rebecca Walker published "Becoming the Third Wave," which attracted widespread attention in society [4].

Feminism in many film and television productions from ancient to modern times comes from real events. Teacher Zhang Guimei from China is the headmaster of Huaping Girls' High School in China's Yunnan Province. She has been rooted in poverty-stricken areas for more than 40 years, taking the

lead in organizing China's first all-fee girls' high school and working for 12 consecutive years to help more than 1,800 girls from poor mountainous areas to fulfill their dream of going to university. Her touching story has been adapted into different forms of film and television works and is well known to the public. On 24 November 2023, China released the highly anticipated film and television work *Beyond the Clouds*, which faced significant skepticism from the audience after its airing. On 10 September 2024, the TV series *She and Her Girls* made its debut, garnering enthusiastic responses and positive reviews from the audience. One can't help but think that the reasons contained in the two film and television works with the same subject matter but with very different evaluations are also factors that lead to the impact on the interpretation of feminist consciousness in today's film and television market. When the unique perspective and accurate expression of feminist works in new media film and television are seriously interpreted, it can bring new research perspectives and ideas to the field of film and television industry, which can trigger the audience's correct understanding of feminism in the new media, and promote the progress and development of social thinking. The research and exploration can offer inspiration and guidance on feminism to new media film and television creators, thereby playing a crucial role in the development and innovation of feminist works in this medium.

2. Literature Review

The central quest of feminism is not confrontation but the search for a harmonious balance between independence and dependence, individual freedom, and social responsibility. Reducing feminism to a rejection of dependence, a blind quest for independence, and a rejection of patriarchal social influences tends to fall into extremes and radicalization, and ignores the truth of the essential need for human beings to have a spiritual connection.

Feminism, as I understand it, is the desire for increased autonomy for women. Any rationale developed to support the general belief in feminism must necessarily include awareness that women's situation and experience differ from men's [5]. Under the new media of film and television, the impact of feminism on social consciousness is divided into two parts: one is conducive to promoting the popularization of the concept of gender equality. New media offers a wide platform for the propagation of feminist concepts, facilitating the widespread popularization of gender equality. It enhances women's subjective awareness and self-confidence.

We see women assert their right to become subjects, and not just objects, of the gaze. Portraits by female modernists demonstrate almost performative ambitions, as if by depicting confident, dynamic subjects, artists hope to bring about their longed-for liberation. Returning the gaze with a vengeance, women imbued images of themselves and one another with curiosity and desire, experimenting with masquerade and self-fashioning [6]. The other aspect is that new media gives women more opportunities to express themselves and their views, thereby enhancing their sense of subjectivity and self-confidence. Through personal social media platforms, women can express their thoughts and feelings and display their talents and charms. This process of self-expression and display not only enhances women's self-knowledge, but also improves their status and influence in society. The variety of women's images is shown to people through new media, which has changed the traditional concept of aesthetics to a certain extent.

The first thing that is found in research on women in the topic of new media is the evolution of female stereotypes. In the new media environment, the problem of female stereotypes still exists, but it is also transforming. Similarly, an assessment of feminist media studies must necessarily address our anxieties about women and feminism, as well as those about media representations of and impact upon women, gender, and sexuality [7]. In the traditional media era, women were often portrayed as weak, dependent, lacking independence and leadership, among other characteristics. Although some media have begun to pay attention to women's independence and self-worth, creating a more

diversified and three-dimensional image of women, some new stereotypes, such as "strong women" and "women of strength," have also begun to appear, and to a certain extent, they have distorted the diversity of women's image. However, New stereotypes such as "strong woman" and "womanly man" have also emerged, potentially distorting diversity of women's images. These stereotypes not only affect women's social status and role positioning but also may have a negative impact on women's self-perception. Therefore, it is of great significance to study the evolution of women's stereotypes, their manifestations, and their impact in the new media in order to eliminate gender prejudice and promote gender equality. Feminist media scholarship has flourished, emerging from a barely perceptible public presence to become a profound influence on the field of communications and across a range of disciplines, and gaining particular authority in cultural and critical studies' [8]. Expansion of women's international image. In the new media era, women's international image has also received widespread attention. YouTube videos, for example, have allowed the international image of Chinese women to be widely disseminated and noticed on new media platforms. Expansion of women's international image.

3. A comparative analysis of the two works

3.1. Script Structure and Plot Shaping

The two film and television productions present feminism in different ways. Their script structure and plot shaping are different. The screenplay of the film *Beyond the Clouds* mainly unfolds from the single-person perspective of Principal Zhang Guimei, mainly focusing on the difficulties and pressures that Principal Zhang Guimei encounters when she is planning to set up a girls' school. Principal Zhang Guimei bears sole responsibility for all the challenges. On the other hand, the script of the TV series *She and Her Girls* includes not only the perspective of Principal Zhang Guimei but also the perspective of the students of the girls' school, the perspective of the teachers, and the perspective of other related staff. The whole story is more complete, and the characters are fuller. In addition, in the film *Beyond the Clouds*, Principal Zhang Guimei's belief in running a girls' school is supported by her longing for the support of her late husband. In the TV series *She and Her Girls*, Principal Zhang Guimei's insistence on organizing a girls' school comes from her own belief in fraternity, her understanding of women's plight and heartfelt pain, and her hope to use all of her strength to help them change their difficult destinies. In the film *Beyond the Clouds*, the "father" of the student who is a violent and alcoholic in reality is changed to the "violent and alcoholic" mother in the film, while in the TV series *She and Her Girls*, the situation in reality is retained, and there is no change in the identity of the characters, as the father of the violent and alcoholic student wants to kill his teenage daughter, and the father wants to kill her. In the series *She and Her Girls*, the identities of the characters remain unchanged. As the violent and alcoholic father tries to marry off his underage daughter and is stopped by the headmaster of the school. In the film *Beyond the Clouds*, the female students in the mountains initially want to skip class to play games at an internet cafe, but when they hear a song playing on campus, they say they like to listen to Jay Chou's songs. In the TV series *She and Her Girls*, the girls have no money to study, they have never seen the world outside the mountains, they do different farm work at home every day, and some of them are even forced to get married early for money. They have never been exposed to online games, and they have never had the chance to listen to Jay Chou's songs, and they want to change their destiny and get out of the mountains by studying.

3.2. Characterization of the main characters

The characterization of the two versions of the film is also different. The characterization of Principal Zhang Guimei in the film *Beyond the Clouds* is closer in terms of the actors' appearance and dress up,

through the language of the lines, gestures and camera effects to express the poor physical condition of Principal Zhang Guimei, the difficulty of sticking to her job and the difficulties along the way, which makes people feel the difficulties of Principal Zhang Guimei and feel sad for her hard work and heavy for the bumps along the way. The characterization of Principal Zhang Guimei in the TV series *She and Her Girls* shows the character traits and inner world of her character mainly through the verbal expression of her lines and dramatic conflicts. Let people see more of Zhang Guimei's great faith and spirit, along the way with everyone to face the difficulties together and actively solve all kinds of difficult problems, not be defeated by the difficulties to make people feel uplifted and full of confidence and hope.

3.3. Comments on the work

Audience reviews for the film *Beyond the Clouds* were predominantly negative, even causing the movie makers to shut down the rating system. During the release period of the film, many viewers had deep expectations from it. However, after it was aired, there were some questions from the audience about the film on the internet. For example, "I don't understand why Zhang Guimei's late husband's warm memories with her are repeatedly interspersed with difficulties in a film of limited duration," and "Zhang Guimei's teaching teachers have raised the issue of "Zhang Guimei's poor family" in the film. Teacher in Support of Teaching suggested that "Teacher Zhang Guimei never said anything harshly critical to me." Some viewers thought that the film was too exaggerated and distorted in its plot and that many details that did not fit the facts and characterization were added to the plot and characterization. In addition, some of the film's plot points were considered to be gender stereotypical and misleading, such as the replacement of male alcoholics and domestic abusers with female characters, a change that has sparked a debate on gender equality and which many consider to be a stigmatization of women. In contrast, for the TV series *She and Her Girls*, viewers all generally gave it high marks. The drama delicately recounted Principal Zhang Guimei's arduous journey along the way and did not overly praise suffering or the greatness of ordinary people, but rather showed the audience how she brought hope to the girls and the far-reaching significance of founding a girls' school. In addition, viewers also appreciated the performances of the cast, saying that the superb acting skills of Song Jia and other powerful actors added to the drama. The drama achieved good results in both ratings and word-of-mouth, and even became one of the highest - rated dramas of 2024 so far.

3.4. Results

First of all, in terms of script structure, the TV series *She and Her Girls* is more realistic, dramatic, and social than the film *Beyond the Clouds*. *She and Her Girls* retains the details of the real events in the plot creation, and through the more in-depth and detailed secondary molding development of the things that have happened in reality, it arouses the audience's resonance and sense of involvement. Compared to the film *Beyond the Clouds*, the series *She and Her Girls* has more dramatic colors. Through the rich narrative form with the viewpoint of Principal Zhang Guimei as the main point of view, the viewpoint of the students of the girls' school as the supplementary point of view, and the viewpoints of other leaders as the supplementary point of view, it shows the difficulties in the preparation for the establishment of the girls' school, and that the awakening of feminism and its power is not the act of a single person, but is the result of the concerted efforts of all the females. The TV series *She and Her Girls* pays more attention to the social significance behind Headmistress Zhang Guimei's running of the girls' school, and profoundly reveals the social dilemmas and problems faced by women: the unequal status of the two sexes in a poverty-stricken environment.

Secondly, in terms of feedback from the general public, the TV series *She and Her Girls* has received more positive feedback and popularity from the audience than the film *Beyond the Clouds*. Audiences who watched the TV series *She and Her Girls* have a deeper understanding and appreciation of the importance and power of feminism in the new media. However, the viewers of the film *Beyond the Clouds* are not clear enough about the feminism and female power that the film conveys and expresses, and more viewers only see Zhang Guimei's hard work and dedication in the film, but they do not experience the optimistic spirit and strong beliefs that she conveys.

4. Discussion

4.1. Discussion of the reasons for the polarization of the evaluation of works

The reason for the different reactions to these two films and TV works is that some film and TV media creations in contemporary society do not have a good interpretation and understanding of feminism, and they are not experienced enough in shaping feminist works in the new media, and they do not really shape the films and TV works from a female point of view. They have wrong judgements and interpretations of feminism, including the belief that women must depend on men's support to gain strength against difficulties; they choose more competitive and hostile relationships in their portrayal of women's relationships with women, without first considering the portrayal of women's relationships of friendship and mutual help; and they have some preconceived stereotypes, for example, women's personalities must be weak, and women's strengths must be thin, and then changes occur in the environment. Then changes occur in the environment. They do not really realise that the reality of women in society is diverse, their strength is strong and their personalities are very different.

The creation process of the film *Beyond the Clouds* ignores the realities of real life, so that many storylines are detached from the social environment and character, resulting in a sense of separation between the characters and the story, so that the audience can't be a good substitute for the audience, which, to a certain extent, weakened the embodiment and expression of feminism. In addition, the film lacks dramatic conflicts that can express the core of women's spirit, and the story development conflicts are interspersed with multiple male characters, which divides the attention to women's perspectives. To a certain extent, it has weakened the realistic meaning and kernel of the film, changing the original realistic and serious social topics into personal difficulties and pain. The TV series *She and Her Girls* provides an in-depth description of the various real-life dilemmas faced by women and the social significance of the film, which, in addition to lamenting the positivity and strength of women's power and feminism, is also capable of reflecting on the difficulties and dilemmas faced by feminism nowadays.

4.2. Suggestions for Feminist Film and Television

The essential difference between an excellent feminist new media film or television work and a fake media film or television work packaged in a common "feminist" jacket lies in whether it can make the audience feel the strong power of women themselves in the process of watching. A true feminist new media film or television production focuses on women and explores women's life experiences, inner world and values. They reflect and criticize sexism and inequality in society and call for respect and equal treatment of women. Present the diversity and complexity of women and avoid stereotyping or symbolizing women's roles. False feminist film and television productions, although featuring women as protagonists, often place women in a passive or subordinate position. The plot may involve sexism or stereotyping and fail to truly reflect the real lives and needs of women. It may look at women from a male perspective and lack true feminist connotations. As to how to establish a good film or television production that is truly conducted from a female perspective, it is necessary to start

from a number of aspects to ensure that the production can truly and deeply reflect women's life experiences, emotional world and values. Here are some suggestions:

Firstly, the definition and connotation of female perspective should be clarified. Female perspective refers to the perspective of observing and interpreting things from women's life experience, emotional experience and values. In film and television works, it means paying attention to women's inner world and presenting their real feelings and needs, rather than viewing and interpreting women's psychology only from the perspective of a bystander or even from a male perspective.

Secondly, we need to go deep into women's lives and dig out real and vivid women's themes. This includes focusing on women's experiences and challenges in different fields, such as family, workplace and society, as well as their resilience and courage in the face of adversity. Through real themes, it can trigger the audience's empathy and convey women's strength and wisdom.

Thirdly to portray three-dimensional and diversified female characters. This means breaking the traditional stereotypes of women's images and portraying women with different characteristics and personalities. In order to maintain and develop the quality of feminism in media communication and film and television works, on the one hand, the awareness of gender equality should be strengthened. Media and film and television practitioners should be deeply aware of the importance of gender equality and avoid portraying gender stereotypes in their works, such as overemphasizing women's appearance, personality or family roles. Advocate and practice the value of gender equality and ensure that works truly reflect the diversity and complexity of women. On the other hand, content innovation and quality control should be strengthened. Enrich women's themes, dig deeper into women's themes, and pay attention to women's life experiences, emotional worlds and values in different social contexts. Through diversified choices of themes, the diverse faces and spiritual qualities of women are shown.

5. Conclusions

Feminist works under new media—film and television show women's perspectives, analyse women's psychology, and release the best way of women's spirit. This will introduce more advanced feminist ideological trends and enhance the spiritual power of women in people's lives. The ideology of feminism under mass media should be positively exported with female value and power. No false feminist disguise can replace the real feminist works in new media film and television. True feminist works should be developed from a female perspective, not from a male perspective, and not from a new media film or television work that is wrapped in a male mindset and stereotypes of women. High-quality feminist works in new media film and television need to correct the perspective of women's roles, penetrate into women's psychology, and emphasize the equality between women and men.

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