

Female Characters in Contemporary Chinese Cinema: Case Studies of Modern Animated Films From 2015 to 2021

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Abstract. From 2015 to 2021, the feminist movement flourished, and gender studies emerged as a new discipline. This paper uses argumentative and literature analysis to conduct a detailed analysis of the portrayal of female characters in Chinese animated films, summarizing ways to improve the genre and techniques for creating excellent female characters. Among five representative domestic animated films selected, the number of female characters has significantly increased, from the absence of a female protagonist in *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* to the independent, strong, and courageous dual female protagonists in *White Snake 2: The Tribulation of the Green Snake*, with increasingly rich character designs. However, most contemporary Chinese film and television works still adhere to traditional gender stereotypes and suffer from many problems: for example, animated works featuring female protagonists often have simple themes, lack diverse character development, and exhibit bias in the portrayal and narrative style of strong women etc. Female characters should be portrayed as "people," not merely "female characters."

Keywords: animation, Chinese films, feminism, female characters

1. Introduction

During the prolonged era of feudal male dominance, men unquestionably held the reins of social discourse, and their consciousness permeated all fields of society, with the animation field being no exception [1]. Animated films are movies created through animation techniques. The theatrical version is a subcategory of animated films. The animated films mentioned in this paper include theatrical animation films and Original Video Animations (OVA).

However, with the evolution of society, feminism has gained prominence, and gender studies as an emerging discipline has gradually become known to the public. Gender studies, which originated in women's studies, focuses on analyzing gender identity and gendered representation, encompassing women, feminism, gender, and politics. Female characters in animated films have become increasingly prominent, in later stages, there even emerged animated films with dual female leads that break traditional stereotypes.

While China's development in gender studies is relatively lagging behind, with many universities not offering relevant courses and inadequate promotion in various aspects. However, with the occurrence of various social events, Chinese women's consciousness has gradually awakened, and more and more people choose to engage in women's studies. It draws on feminist and

interdisciplinary approaches, placing women's lives and experiences at the core of research while studying gender structures in society and culture; systems of privilege and oppression; as well as the relationship between power and gender. Almost every Chinese animated film features various types of male characters, but the number of female characters is relatively small, and their range of personalities is also very limited. As feminist ideas break through the thick layer of historical constraints, female characters in animations have begun to gradually come into the spotlight [1].

In the modern history of Chinese cinema, there is still considerable room for development in awareness regarding gender studies. Most of today's contemporary Chinese films and TV works still adhere to traditional gender stereotypes. Although successful films and their creators include women, the gender of the creators cannot be discerned from their works—most of these female creators are essentially "performers of masculinity" and convey contempt for the female gender [2]. This demonstrates that Chinese cinema still has a long way to go in shaping female characters and fostering gender equality awareness.

2. Purpose of research

- 1) By comparing release dates of various films, this study analyzes the evolution of female characters in domestic animations based on their content and character portrayal.
- 2) Categorize, integrate, and summarize domestic female animated characters to facilitate the examination of the characteristics and techniques of character portrayal.
- 3) Analyze the impact of female characters on the plot in domestic animated films
- 4) Identify current issues, summarize ways to improve in the future, and develop techniques for shaping excellent female characters.

3. Research methods

The article mainly adopts the method of argumentative analysis and literature analysis to conduct a detailed analysis of the portrayal of female characters in the branch of China's animated films, selecting several representative movies, including *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* (2015), *Big Fish & Begonia* (2016), *Ne Zha: The Demon Child Comes Into the World* (2019), *The King's Avatar: For the Glory* (2019), and *White Snake 2: The Tribulation of the Green Snake* (2021) (listed in chronological order of their release).

3.1. The absence of female characters

Chinese animated films have long lagged behind their Western and Japanese counterparts, with significant room for improvement in storytelling, production quality, and character design. However, in recent years, domestic animated films have experienced several phases of "rise", making tangible progress in the domestic animation sector.

The first notable "rise" was marked by the 2015 release of *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*. However, the film notably lacked female characters, with all main story lines revolving around traditional male protagonists. Admittedly, the film is adapted from *Journey to the West*, a classic work that originally contains few female characters. Yet, the film also features a large number of original characters, such as the male supporting role "Jiang Liu'er." Though his character exudes innocent charm and leans toward stereotypical feminine traits, his core identity remains male. Moreover, female characters are barely seen in the work, let alone the creation of charismatic female roles.

Nevertheless, its dual male lead setup and comprehensive production quality still marked a significant advancement in Chinese animated film making.

In 2019, Chinese animated films experienced another "renaissance" with the release of *Ne Zha: The Demon Child Comes Into the World*. The plot features dramatic twists and turns, with high-quality production, the film showcased the progress of domestic animations. However, female characters remain scarce in the series. The only female supporting character with relatively significant screen time is Lady Yin, who will be analyzed in depth separately in the second section. Similar to *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, the male supporting character "Ao Bing" exhibits traditional feminine traits like elegance and gentleness, and refined demeanor. Yet the story maintains a dual male protagonist setup with notably limited female representation.

In 2019, the film *The King's Avatar: For the Glory* was released, but it paled in comparison to *Ne Zha: The Demon Child Comes Into the World*. As a 2D animated movie, it featured an extremely small number of female characters, most of whom were supporting roles.

3.2. Shaping of female character types

Based on domestic animated films, female characters can be categorized into four distinct types: the Kind-hearted and Innocent Type, the Demon/Monster Type, the Cold and Powerful Type, and the Virtuous Wife and Good Mother Type.

3.2.1. The Kind-hearted and Innocent archetype

The Kind-hearted and Innocent archetype represents the most stereotypical and prevalent female protagonist in Chinese cinema. These characters typically emerge as protected figures, embodying virtues of kindness and gentleness. However, when lacking competence, they often face failure, they tend to be portrayed as reckless—courageous but lacking in strategy. In the end, they still rely on male characters for help and protection. Currently, women's fundamental self-awareness of gender has long been absent. This distorted perception and misuse of such absence foster women's dependence on and inertia toward men, leaving their fates in the hands of others [3].

Released in 2016, the film *Big Fish & Begonia* features a well-defined female protagonist named Chun. The director's original intent was to shape her as a kind, brave, and pure heroine, yet the character development and plot progression lack depth, making the protagonist appear courageous but lacking strategic thinking, ultimately endangering the village for personal gain. However, Chun defies convention with independent thinking. She listens to her inner voice and pursues self-actualization. Compared with the previous approach of downplaying female characters in domestic animated films, the portrayal of the protagonist Chun highlights positive aspects, though narrative flaws leave her character development somewhat incomplete [4]. In this work, while the final depiction of Chun diverges slightly from the original vision, one can still perceive the creators' efforts to break free from traditional female stereotypes and their dedication to depicting female characters.

A similar character is Su Mucheng from *The King's Avatar*. She is portrayed as a "sister-like" figure to the male protagonist, with an understanding and lovely personality. While her sensible and adorable personality drives the emotional narrative, her role in the film is limited to verbal expressions—there is no description of her motivations or background at all, making her characterization hollow and lacking in depth.

3.2.2. The Cold and Powerful Type

This type is a relatively rare category of female characters.

Released in 2021, *White Snake 2: The Tribulation of the Green Snake* is a dual-female-lead animated film, with the two protagonists portrayed as sisters. The heroine "Xiao Qing" demonstrates exceptional combat prowess and embodies self-reliance, breaking the barriers of traditional female character tropes. The other heroine "Xiao Bai" appears as a male character in the film's narrative framework, despite her traditional female identity. Her resemblance to Xiao Qing's childhood memory of "Xiao Bai" leads her to repeatedly question, "Who exactly are you?" The overall narrative thread of the film revolves around a story of identity recognition and confirmation [5].

Another female character of similar type is Xia Ming from *The King's Avatar*, a member of the protagonist's team who provided crucial support when others hesitated. However, her screen time is limited, and she is not depicted in detail.

3.2.3. Female characters of the Demon/Monster Type

Female characters of the Demon/Monster Type usually take on the role of villains in domestic animated films. These roles prioritize personal gain, contradicting the stereotypical image of women "selfless and devoted". They are usually portrayed as beautiful women with seductive, alluring appearances, often symbolizing ferocity, wickedness, and ruthlessness [6].

In *White Snake 2: The Tribulation of the Green Snake*, "Master Baoqingfang" appears in the form of a nine-tailed fox. She has a distinct personality, is intelligent and powerful, and can always help the protagonists at critical moments—making her a top-tier combatant in the film. Her portrayal breaks away from stereotypical female characters confined to emotional narratives. For instance, her assistance to the protagonist stems not from sentimentality but from strategic "deal-making", prioritizing personal gain over the clichéd "overprotective motherly devotion". This portrayal gives the character a sense of depth and sparks curiosity about her backstory. It showcases the diversity of female characters in the work, allowing viewers to perceive that the portrayal of women in domestic animated films has gradually become more rich and varied over time.

3.2.4. The Virtuous Wife and Good Mother Type

The Virtuous Wife and Good Mother Type is another relatively frequently appearing category of female characters, and their portrayal also largely conforms to traditional female stereotypes.

Among all female characters in *Ne Zha: The Demon Child Comes Into the World*, Ne Zha's mother, "Lady Yin"—who appears in the most scenes, embodies a quintessential strong-willed mother figure. Her more assertive personality adds depth to the character. Her daily routine of working outside and then returning home to care for her child mirrors the realities of most women and she is also deeply devoted to her child [7]. In essence, Lady Yin is portrayed without any "vilification" or "idealization"; her image is the closest to the real status of modern mothers [8].

In *Big Fish & Begonia*, compared to the somewhat unsuccessful portrayal of the female protagonist, the depiction of the female supporting character—the protagonist's grandmother—is rather interesting. Throughout the film, the grandmother takes on the role of a "top-tier combatant." She saves the village and the female protagonist from peril at a critical moment, and eventually transforms into a phoenix to stay by the side of her husband, who has turned into a towering tree. This portrayal somewhat subverts the traditional stereotype that men usually take on the role of "savior."

3.3. The role of female characters in plot development: the connection between female protagonists and the work's theme

Through analyzing several works, it is not difficult to find that regardless of whether female characters play the role of protagonists, their appearances are often full of sensibility and strong emotion. Their story lines often revolve around driving emotional narratives, particularly illuminating paths for protagonists when they face confusion. This characteristic is especially prominent among female supporting characters, as seen in "Su Mucheng" and "Xia Ming" from *The King's Avatar* and Lady Yin in *Ne Zha: The Demon Child Comes Into the World* mentioned above.

Furthermore, The protagonist's gender also follows a certain pattern in relation to the work's theme.

When animated protagonists are female characters, the narratives often revolve around emotional themes. However, the female lead's motivations frequently intersect with other characters, resulting in a disconnect between the central theme and the plot. The thematic elements are rarely emphasized throughout the entire film. For example, the entire plot of *Big Fish & Begonia* revolves around the female protagonist repaying the male protagonist for saving her life, while its core theme is "guarding and staying true to one's original aspiration"; in *White Snake 2: The Tribulation of the Green Snake*, the story focuses on the female protagonist searching for her sister and the process of rescuing her, with the core theme of "self-reliance through one's own efforts." Yet the thematic elements are scarce and abrupt in the storyline.

Moreover, when the animated protagonist is female, love-related story lines are inevitably present. For instance, in *Big Fish & Begonia*, the male supporting character 'Qiu' harbors unrequited love for the female protagonist; in *White Snake 2: The Tribulation of the Green Snake*, the female protagonist and the male incarnation of the other female lead support each other, share their innermost thoughts, and develop an ambiguous relationship that culminates in the "male lead" sacrificing himself to save the female protagonist.

However, in works featuring male protagonists, the content and plots demonstrate remarkable diversity while maintaining strong thematic coherence, with minimal focus on romantic elements. The male leads' motivations primarily revolve around self-discovery rather than external relationships. For example, *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* tells the story of Sun Wukong and a young monk who rediscover their original aspirations and achieve self-redemption during their adventurous journey accompanied by each other, with the core theme of "friendship, fortitude, and courage"; *Ne Zha: The Demon Child Comes Into the World* chronicles the protagonist's transformation from a "born demon" to a "defiant warrior who fights against fate," embodying the philosophy of "my destiny is determined by me, not heaven." *The King's Avatar* follows esports champion Ye Xiu who holds the dream of becoming an esports champion, overcomes numerous difficulties, and finally leads his team to the peak of glory, highlighting the themes of "proud achievements and relentless dreams."

4. Conclusion

From 2015 to mid-2021, Chinese animated films have seen a notable increase in female characters. While *The Monkey King: Hero Is Back* featured no female characters at all, *White Snake 2: The Tribulation of the Green Snake* introduced two independent, strong, and courageous female protagonists, demonstrating significant progress in character development. However, based on the analysis above, it can be found that there are still some issues that need improvement:

4.1. Diversity of themes in female protagonist animations

As mentioned in Part Three, the female protagonists in most of the works are involved with other characters, and the emotional aspect is very large. It is hoped that future themes will be more diverse.

4.2. Diversity in the personalities of female protagonists

Most female protagonists still carry stereotypical traits of selfless dedication, indecisiveness, and emotional impulsiveness, often portrayed as sympathetic underdogs to varying degrees. They predominantly occupy socially disadvantaged positions. Rational, decisive, and self-interested female characters are typically relegated to supporting roles, though they could exhibit more diverse personalities to become protagonists. Creating multifaceted female characters should make audiences forget their diversity. Instead of striving for perfect women, we should create diverse female characters and then make people overlook this "diversity". We should showcase the pain and breakdowns of various female characters, making viewers care about them not because they're women, but because they're real human beings. The strength of female characters lies in their resilience to rise again after being broken, not in their innate perfection.

4.3. The portrayal of powerful women

With the awakening of female consciousness, more animations aim to portray powerful women, yet their methods often contrast by downplaying male characters—a technique frequently employed by Disney. In *White Snake 2: The Tribulation of the Green Snake*, for instance, all male figures in Shura City are depicted as the feminine "other". They are either violent and insane, engaging in a war that seeks to destroy everything—and war, as a symbol of violence, is also the ultimate metaphor for the so-called masculine strength that has been shaped by social and cultural norms in real historical contexts. Thus, in artistic representation, these bull-headed figures are ultimately crafted as "fierce warriors" embodying extreme masculinity. Highlighting female strength and conviction through male vilification. High-quality female-centric works should avoid the notion of the "unappealing male." By showcasing conflicts between the two genders without dismissing either side, and by reflecting the complex beliefs that stem from diverse backgrounds, such works can make both characters feel more three-dimensional and authentic.

In conclusion, portray female characters as whole individuals rather than stereotypical "female characters". When crafting compelling narratives, the protagonist's femininity should be a defining feature. Avoid portraying an imperfect female character; a standout character is bound to face challenges and hardships.

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