

The Dilemma of Shaping Female Roles in Chinese Films: A Case Study of the Film Lost in the Stars

Yuchen Gao^{1,a,*}

¹Communication University of Zhejiang, No. 998, Yuqiao West Road, Wutong Street, Tongxiang City, Zhejiang Province, 310018, China

a. 1224184026@qq.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: The female roles in Chinese films face the dilemma of stereotyping in a patriarchal society. As a way of cultural dissemination, the image expression of female roles will become an important form of expressing female voices. Therefore, breaking through the dilemma of female role shaping is particularly important. Through text analysis, this study analyzes the three female roles in the film *Lost in the Stars* and explores the reasons for the difficulties in shaping female roles from the directors, audiences and industries. The portrayal of female roles by directors with patriarchal ideology makes them become the individual who is stared at. The excessive expectation of female roles by female audiences has led female roles to move from one extreme to another. The inherent entertainment nature of movies renders female characters a significant subject of discourse. The scarcity of female participants within the film sector results in diminishing women's expression and their relegation to silence. The convergence of these intricate elements culminates in the quandary of molding female roles within Chinese cinema.

Keywords: female roles, gender elements, female voice, feminism

1. Introduction

With the changes in social structure and economic development, female roles in Chinese films have experienced many changes, but they have not escaped the fate of being stared at still today. In the 1920s, female roles in films served the male roles completely [1] and lacked their own background stories or role traits. The 1930s to 1940s were a prosperous period of artistic creation in Chinese film history. During this period, the unique liberation of humanistic thinking allowed for the emergence of diverse female roles in films [1]. Nonetheless, the portrayal of these female roles remains incomplete and lacking in realism, possibly due to the societal culture prevailing during that era.

In the 1980s, male directors led by Yimou ZHANG brought Chinese films to the world. The female roles in these highly acclaimed films have become the standard model in Chinese commercial films [2]. They have become visual figures reflecting traditional Chinese culture rather than expressing themselves as women [2]. After the 1990s, with the commercialization of films in China, female roles became a way for films to attract audiences and an object of desire prying [2]. Satisfaction for male audiences no longer stems solely from female roles merely serving the plot of the film; instead, their preference lies in female roles that can fulfil their individual desires. Film practitioners, possessing

greater wealth and elevated social status, have begun crafting female roles aligned with male preferences.

However, in recent years, people have found that female audiences are the main film consumers. Feminist films, films with female themes, and female group image films have become a hot topic in the Chinese film industry today. Many diverse female roles are beginning to appear in films. The film *Lost in the Stars* grossed over 3 billion yuan in revenue. It tells the story of a woman who organizes a team to avenge a man and seek justice for her good friend. In the poster and trailer of the film, it is shown to the audience as a movie that describes the group image of females, leading many female audiences to buy tickets and watch. However, the portrayal of female roles in this film is characterized by stereotypes and extremism. Some plots in this film have some sex and violence implications. According to a survey of the Chinese film industry, films that have generated revenue exceeding one billion yuan all feature scenes depicting sexual gaze and violence, which are not presented in isolation but rather in pairs [3]. What is more, female bodies became an invisible factor for creating visual stimulation in the Chinese film industry [3].

As an ‘authoritative conveyor’, films have had an extremely important impact on forming public values [4]. Therefore, shaping female roles in films has become an important way to spread ideology, for example, feminism. Moreover, the gender roles in films can also affect teenagers’ gender identity towards themselves [5]. It will affect their views and behaviours towards gender and different gender groups and even their career choices [5]. Therefore, female roles in movies have become the projection of female identity groups in society, playing a very important role.

Most of the above materials criticize existing female roles but do not explore their causes from a multidimensional perspective. This article uses a text analysis method to examine the dilemma surrounding the shaping of female roles in Chinese films. The examination is conducted through three main aspects: the portrayal by directors, audience preferences, and the existing state of the Chinese film industry. Through a comprehensive analysis and synthesis of the challenges inherent in the shaping of female roles, potential pathways for future film practitioners can be identified. This can liberate them from the confines of conventional, patriarchal societal norms dictating female roles and bodies. Consequently, individuals can discover a realm of personal expression and freedom within society.

2. The Role Shaping of the Directors

All the female roles in films are the objects shaped by the directors. For this reason, they become the carriers of spreading patriarchal consciousness when directors shape them with obvious patriarchal ideas. Thus, the directors are one of the main reasons why these female roles cannot interpret women from an objective and equal perspective in films. Female roles are trapped in the identities created by directors.

2.1. A Female Role Who Can Be Controlled by the Male Role

Muzi LI, the victim in this film, is a typical image of a good wife in society. In the storyline of this film, she was cheated by Fei HE, who was her husband and killed her. Although she had much wealth, the right to use it actually belonged to her husband. When she was about to be killed by her husband, her first reaction was not to save herself or leave the clues to the police but to take out a pregnant ultrasound picture to expect her husband to change his mind.

Both emotionally and materially, directors want to create the dominant in a family into a male role. These plots satisfy men’s expectations of female subsidiary roles in society; in other words, women in sexual relationships will not become the winning ‘masters’ [6]. Muzi LI’s non-aggressive femininity makes her become an unarmed victim.

In the characterization of this film, the directors use a large amount of white, soft, cotton and linen texture clothes to describe her. In her background story, she is a daughter of a wealthy man, and her class is completely different between her husband, a poor gambler skilled in deception.

A wealthy woman inherits family property and marries with a lower-class man who gains money himself by deceiving others. This plot is like an ancient story in China called *the Cowherd and the Weaving Maid*. The imagination of lower-class men towards higher-class women has historically persisted within Chinese patriarchal society. Their aspirations for female dominance find concealment within romantic narratives, seeking to persuade women to embrace and willingly provide resources, money, and intimacy. This role of controllable femininity, embodied by Muzi LI, represents a manifestation of the male community's objectives, aimed at securing an advantageous position in social relationships, effectively reducing females to the status of commodities.

2.2. A Female Role Who Can Not Be Controlled by the Male Role

Jane, on the contrary to Muzi LI, is a female role whom Fei HE does not control. She is a typical image of a bad girl. She impersonates as the real Muzi LI to approach Fei HE and turn Fei HE from a perpetrator to a victim. She prevents men in sexual relationships from achieving absolute dominance, which makes her hated and ostracized by Fei HE, the male protagonist in this film.

In the characterization of this film, her clothing is mainly in red and black, which can distinguish her from the real Muzi LI. The camera language and montages in *Lost in the Stars* have many scenes that seem like the vision in human eyes to peek and scan Jane's figure. When she and Fei HE have some intimate shots, the camera deliberately does not show Fei HE's face sometimes and only shows his limbs to satisfy the audience's empathy. This footage satisfies men's expectations of female sexuality, which means we can still watch her body even if Jane is not the real wife in a family relationship.

Men's vigilance and fear of beautiful women have always existed in various literature. For example, many beautiful goblins are in the classic Chinese literature *Journey to the West*. They are the 'obstacles' in the story and the villains full of temptation. They tempt men with insufficient abilities, while capable men beat them in a violent way to win. One of the classical lines of the protagonist Wukong SUN is: 'evil goblin, watch me hit you by the golden cudgel!' [7].

The screenwriter portrays the uncontrollable female image of the male protagonist as a bad female image to rationalize his aggressive behaviour. In the film *Lost in the Stars*, all the extreme and violent actions that Fei HE has done to Jane have been rationalized as forced behaviour. Men's uncontrollable behaviour is not due to their own lack of self-control but rather to bad women. The male role is tempted, forced or the one who makes a counterattack or a warrior rather than a tyrant.

2.3. A Female Role Who Can Control the Male Role

Mai CHEN, the person who solved the case, is a woman full of masculinity and battles for control of the case from a man. She is a typical tomboy image and saved by Muzi LI. In the characterization of this film, her clothes are mostly made of leather, stiff suits and always have an image of sleeveless clothing. What is more, she is a loner with short hair and tattoos. The screenwriter is almost portraying a female role based on a male prototype.

In the actress selection, they chose a girl with a neutral style, which sets her apart from the other two female roles. What is more worth exploring is Mai CHEN's unsociable personality. In reality, women with a neutral temperament are not isolated in society. However, in the narratives of the directors, women with this personality must have experienced painful experiences and will not have complete and happy family relationships. This means that directors do not acknowledge that there will be women with masculine personalities under natural circumstances. This inner denial of

individual personality prevents directors from shaping truly distinctive female roles and will still be limited to the social rules of ‘standard women’.

2.4. The Gender Elements Between Those Three Female Roles

The director’s patriarchal ideology and misogyny in this film leads to the limitation of female roles. He let the three female roles have completely different temperaments in a same story, which means good girl, bad girl, and tomboy cannot appear on the same female role at the same time. These different gender elements also subtly influence women in society to classify themselves as a good girl, bad girl or tomboy.

The director divides the real Muzi LI and the fake Muzi LI, Jane, into two standards of male sexuality [6]. Muzi LI is the real wife in this film and the widely promoted image of a good woman in society. Jane, on the other hand, is a bad image of a woman in society, using her sexual attraction and body as weapons to harm men, which is necessary to be vigilant. The misogyny within male groups leads to a longing for a woman who will remain loyal to them without betraying them. These male groups hold a strong aversion towards women who might place them in situations either beyond their control or under the control of women. This sentiment arises from an awareness of their inability to resist the allure of females [8]. To avoid being disadvantaged in sexual relationships, males tend to vilify the behaviours associated with the female role. This serves to justify their actions, framing women as inherently flawed. Consequently, any succumbing to temptation and errors are viewed as unrelated to their own selves.

In the rise of feminism today, in addition to Muzi LI and Jane, there have been new gender elements in female roles named Mai CHEN. She is a ‘third gender woman’ with a female body but full of male gender elements. The directors refrained from employing diverse gender elements for the construction of female roles. The feminine attributes of these ‘third gender women’ were eliminated, leaving only their masculine temperament intact.

The director’s patriarchal ideology makes him believe that the only possibility for a female role to challenge the control of male is to abandon her feminine identity and similar to a man. He isolated her from any gender group.

3. The Preferences of the Audiences

The audience’s preference is another factor affecting the diversity of shaping female roles. As a commercial product, the actual revenue of a film is an important indicator that needs to be considered during production. As a result, filmmakers will cater to the public’s preferences to create film roles that can please the audiences. This means that in the current generation of the rise of feminism, new female roles will likely cater to female audiences by consuming feminism.

3.1. Women’s Expectations for Female Roles.

In the film *Lost in the Stars*, Muzi LI is the female role that is not liked by female audiences. After the film was released, many girls spontaneously evaluated and discussed this role on social media, using her personality as a negative example, claiming not to become a woman like Muzi LI. On the other hand, Mai CHEN is a popular female role among female audiences. They consider rational, calm and masculine women as the more popular women rising in the new era.

Women have been oppressed for a long time in a patriarchal society, so they hope to counterattack or obtain emotional release by the plots or female roles in films. Many female audiences attempt to prove the rise of women’s status in society by making female roles in movies stronger, more powerful or having the ability to defeat the male roles [8]. Nevertheless, their actions serve to reinforce the patriarchal perspective that a courageous and logical male disposition holds a superior position,

capable of triumphing, whereas a tender and emotive female disposition assumes an inferior position, unable to shield them from danger.

The situation could potentially lead to a transition among the female roles in films, where a shift from one extreme to another might occur. This implies that more female characters who have distanced themselves from traditional notions of femininity could emerge in cinematic narratives as leaders or victors.

3.2. The Social Function of Films

As an important way for offline social [9], films have features as a social function to promote audience discussion and film dissemination. Creating female roles that can be discussed is a good way to avoid other attacks on male roles. In the film *Lost in the Stars*, Fei HE, the male role, did many unethical things. However, the audience's discussion focuses on the victim, Muzi LI, rather than the perpetrator Fei HE. Female roles become the ones who take responsibility for being discussed by the public for male roles. Screenwriters and directors rationalize the male role's wrongdoing while also blaming the female roles for the consequences. This gives the shaping of female roles a functional feature, as she serves as a trigger and a discussed substitute rather than an independent individual.

4. The Current Situation of the Chinese Film Industry

4.1. The Commercial and Entertainment Features of Chinese Film Industry

Laura Mulvey introduced the concept of women being seen into the film industry [10], and Chinese film scholars have repeatedly applied it to Chinese films' theoretical and critical research. It also directly and indirectly affects Chinese films' narrative and framing strategies in shaping female roles [11]. In Chinese movies, there are many female roles that express patriarchal thought, and they are stared at and judged by both creators and viewers. The commercialization and entertainment of Chinese films have caused them to lose some artistic value and become a form of entertainment, further increasing the stereotype of female roles in films. People hope to see women who satisfy their prying desires.

Being watched and creating a sense of pleasure for viewers has become a requirement for female film roles, also known as the requirement for selecting actresses. Compared to male actors, there are stricter requirements for the body shape and age of female actors. Moreover, the age span of the main female roles appearing in films is narrower than that of male roles. The pursuit of entertainment in films has become a strict standard for both actresses and female roles in Chinese films. This standard limits the appearance and voice of actresses and the expression and presentation of female roles.

4.2. The Lack of Female Voice in the Chinese Film Industry

In European and American countries, the percentage of female students in the Department of Journalism and Communication is over 50% [12]. In China, the proportion is also close to this, but the well-known directors who hold the discourse power in the industry are still mainly male. Most women work as actors, makeup artists and agents in the Chinese film industry.

Whether female audiences or practitioners, most of them appear as listeners and critics rather than speakers [5]. The discourse right is still controlled by men, which makes women's expression in films a state of aphasia. Due to the difficulty of achieving complete neutrality in gender topics [5], the lack of a female voice can lead to a single mindset in gender topics and a loss of diversity in opinion expression in social media.

5. Conclusion

The shaping of the directors, the audience's expectation, and the film industry's limitations have collectively created a dilemma in shaping female roles.

On the other hand, it is important to distinguish between text and image, considering that a novel can convey its perspective using words, whereas impressions can solely be perceived through the audience's observation. Ensuring the precision of information becomes a challenge when visual depictions fall short of capturing our intended expressions.

Another aspect requiring attention is the enduring influence of patriarchy on the upbringing environment over an extended period. The challenge lies in reconciling ideological barriers among audiences from distinct eras and genders while avoiding the pitfall of self-validation. The aforementioned issues are not resolved within this article but require attention and resolution.

Despite persistent challenges in cultivating female presence within the Chinese film industry, an increasing number of female directors are venturing into the field and fearlessly expressing their views. As a greater variety of perspectives on gender emerges, many possibilities also come to light. Exploring diverse female roles remains a shared concern for feminists and industry practitioners. Functioning as a vital conduit for ideas, female roles in films are poised to become advocates for many women amidst today's feminist resurgence.

References

- [1] Song, Q. (2016). *Film Performance and Feminism*. *Film Literature*, 2016(09), 64-66.
- [2] Xu, H. (2008). *On the Female Characters in Contemporary Chinese Film Art*. *Film Literature*, 2008(15), 41-42.
- [3] Hao, Y. (2023). *Research on the Shaping and Acceptance of Female Images in High Box Office Domestic Movies* [Doctoral dissertation, Inner Mongolia University]. DOI: 10.27224/d.cnki.gnmdu.2022.001377.
- [4] Wang, Z. (2015). *Gender Landscape in Consumer Culture - Female Images in Chinese Films in Recent Years*. *Contemporary Literature*, 2015(01), 103-109. DOI: 10.19290/j.cnki.51-1076/i.2015.01.023.
- [5] Liu, L. (2004). *Gender and Media Communication*. Communication University of China Press.
- [6] de Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The Second Nature*. (Z. Kelu, Trans.). Shanghai Translation Publishing House.
- [7] Wu, C. (2005). *Journey to the West*. People's Literature Publishing House, 2005 edition.
- [8] Ueno, C. (2023). *Misogyny*. Shanghai Guangqi Book Co., Ltd.
- [9] Xue, N., & Li, L. (2022). *Audience Composition and Aesthetic Preference: An Analysis Based on the "Chinese Film Audience Satisfaction Survey"*. *Contemporary Film*, 2022(03), 4-16.
- [10] Mulvey, L. (1992). *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Films*. In Z. Hongjun (Ed.), *Films and New Methods* (p. 212). China Radio and Television Press, 1992 edition.
- [11] Jin, D., & Cao, Q. (2007). *Feminism, Female Movies, or Female Consciousness: Reconsidering Several Female Topics Involved in Current Chinese Films*. *Social Sciences*, 2007(12), 171-180.
- [12] Carter, C. (1999). *News, Gender, and Rights*. Weber Cultural Services Press, 1999 edition, p. 56.