

Feminism “Up On Stage”?

— A Discussion on the Deformation of Female Images in Chinese Film and TV Works

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Abstract: Taking Chinese film and TV works as the research subject, this paper attempts to analyze the development of feminism and the deformation of the female image shaped by film and TV works, summarize and reflect on the motives as well as the results of these works. We deploy a case-study methodology to scrutinize the evolution of feminism and the prevailing trend of distorted female portrayals in film and TV. It identifies three primary modes of distortion in the depiction of women in three mediums. This paper also aims to advocate that film and TV works should reasonably shape female image, veritably reflect the voice of females and convey feminism, and positively promote the development of feminism in China. At the same time, we advocate that filmmakers ought to fathom the true essence of feminism, genuinely reflecting the authentic voices and demands of women. We also hope that this paper will have a deeper significance for the subsequent research.

Keywords: feminism, film and TV programs, female image, malformation

1. Introduction

As the world gradually enters the Internet era, multimedia and media convergence technologies have risen in response, resulting in tremendous innovation and advancement in the film and TV industry, with more diversified and convenient means and channels of screening. Due to the striking advancement of information dissemination technology and the tremendous amount of information[1], people are showing growing concern about film and TV works and the connotation hidden in them. Looking at China’s film and TV works, a sharp increase in the number of works expressing feminist topics can be perceived in recent years, which reveals contemporary Asian women’s common desires and yearnings. These feminism-oriented works, many of which are haunted by the deformation and stigmatization of feminism, appeal to massive female audiences[2]. Female image is undergoing a conversion from one stereotype to another, that is, from women are “sexually attractive, frail, and clingy to men” to “wealthy, beautiful, and outstanding”. It seems that female images are no longer single but more diversified as feminism appears more frequently in China’s film and TV works. However, the author proposes to interrogate: Is the female image presented by these works stereotyped once again? Are females’ real striving and desires properly expressed? Do China’s film and TV works shape reasonable female images and convey authentic feminism?

This paper intends to study and discuss today's phenomenon of the deformed female image in China's film and TV industry. Through case analysis concerning the above issues, the author tries to find out potential solutions to change the current status quo, and thus reverse the misunderstanding of feminism, promoting feminism's dissemination in a correct and more moderate way.

2. Feminism Development

As a social theory and movement, feminism originates from and is motivated by the female's experience, centering on the core issues of what is "gender equality" and how to achieve it. Western feminism has set off three waves of development, and it has consistently run through an internal logic with "gender equality" as the central axis [3]. To mitigate the upward trend of gender inequality, Europe and the United States are gradually attaching more significance to the protection of female rights and interests, bringing females more opportunities and better treatment in terms of education, health, employment, family and politics.

The current Chinese feminism emphasizes the unity of males and females within a unified framework to determine the status of females [4], which resembles Western feminism in the past. Chinese feminism began in the early 20th century along with modernization, nevertheless, its rudiment contradicts Western feminism in that it has not essentially viewed "male" and "female" in biological terms throughout its history. In contemporary China, waves of women's agitations flood popular media, especially the Internet, in response to various news items, entertainment programs, gossip, and anecdotes. China Central Television's annual Spring Festival gala has been condemned for staging "misogynistic" shows. In quick succession, such outcries have drawn much international attention to what some see as a "Chinese feminist awakening" [5].

However, since the advent of feminism in China, its influence has surged in the domestic sphere over recent years. "Feminism" (nǚquanzhuyi) can literally mean "an ideology for promoting" either "women's rights" or "women's privilege." The term 'feminism' has been gradually permeating Chinese society, however, its interpretation remains inconsistent and often skewed. Many perceive feminism as a battle to usurp authority from men, suppress and negate them, aiming to build a society dominated by women. This distorted understanding inspires numerous women, leading them to fervently embrace what they believe to be "feminism," indiscriminately endorsing all "powerful woman" figures, with an aggressive intent to topple male hegemony and stoke gender discord as their stated goals. This skewed phenomenon can be attributed to a combination of both manipulative individuals with concealed agendas pushing for radical feminism and the distorted representation of feminism within media platforms. This unfortunate synergy deepens the public's misinterpretation of feminism, instigating a detrimental cycle of misconstrued representation. When viewed as the latter, "feminism" becomes a dirty word in popular discourse, conveying an image of callous, selfish, and money-hungry Chinese women. This politics of naming and the ontological roots of Chinese feminism(s) have largely escaped the existing scholarship [6].

3. Analysis of Female's Status Quo in China

Female rights have been expanding in modern times, meanwhile, the development of productivity has contributed to numerous working opportunities for women. They begin to engage in social institutions and no longer be an invisible role that exclusively helps men in the family. Females' social status having been improved, but there are still social problems. Although China enacts laws that explicitly stipulate gender equality, females still face various forms of gender discrimination in the workplace and in real life. For example, some employers prefer to hire men over women or offer higher salaries to men. While there are many talented women in senior positions in business and government, men still dominate these positions. Moreover, women may suffer from sexual

harassment, even violence, in different places such as public places, workplaces, and even at home. In the meantime, “leftover lady” has become a particularly prominent social problem in China, which refers to older unmarried women, especially those who are over 30. Influenced by social pressure and traditional beliefs, they are normally considered the “leftover” ones when they reach a certain age but remain unmarried. There is also a “double burden” for Chinese women, that is, to be responsible for both their families and work. Even when they gain success at work, women are still required to be responsible for their children and most of the housework. Women encounter too much unequal treatment in their lives, they are therefore more eager for a sudden appearance on the horizon and better treatment. This expectation is pinned on the female roles in film and TV works.

4. Analysis of the Impact of Feminism on the Shaping of Female Images in Chinese Film and TV Works

Chinese films featuring female topics normally comprise three categories: female-themed films, feminist films, and female-directed films [7]. The early and prolonged decline and exploratory visualization of the early stages of Chinese intellectual liberation is the “first stage”, which imposes slight limitations on the portrayal of female characters in the film. From a female perspective, there is still a long way to go in molding female characters living in a bitter environment as the world of the females in these films and TV works is excessively restricted and one-sided. From young to old, from rich to poor, the multi-layered environment of the female protagonists in film always seems to be unable to escape a hint of sadness, a strong sense of tragedy that seems to dance with the shackles of female film development, in which all female emotions appear to be forced and gifted. Nevertheless, female emotions should not be presented in this way. Apart from this, the point of entry and the roles shaped in these works are also relatively homogeneous concerning the body images of females. Watching the film *I Am Not Madame Bovary*, the audience can instantly feel the deep sorrow and misfortune that shrouds the female protagonist through her body image. The same is true of the female body image embodied in *Women Who Flirt* and *The Queens*. However, if the audiences look deeper into the core of the female image, they will instinctively assume that women were superficial and vulgar.

In recent years, feminist rhetoric and movements are widely spread in our society, followed by bold and more intense attempts at the expression of films. Directors nowadays are inclined to choose themes that reflect the status of women in the family so as to call for the respect and liberation of women. Chinese film and TV productions have portrayed considerable intelligent and clever women with a pioneering feminist consciousness. For instance, in *Ju Zi Hong Le* (which means the mandarin orange is turning red), the female protagonist Xiuhe boldly pursued her love regardless of the constraints of traditional feudal rituals. With a sudden arousal, another female Mrs Yung was deeply moved by her boldness, thus assisting Xiuhe in escaping the oppression of traditional feudal rituals. Although this TV series turned out to be a tragedy, Xiuhe made her own choice in a life-or-death situation, which undoubtedly embodied feminism as well as feminist consciousness in film and TV work as a whole. The TV series specifies the fact that Chinese females are combating patriarchy and the stereotypes of women under long-term feudalism by making strong appeals and demands.

4.1. Ping Guo—Female Deeply Objectified by Gender Opposition

The movie *Ping Guo* (which means Apple in English) tells a story about a woman named Pingguo working in a recreational business and her husband An Kun as a contractor, living together in a narrow and dim room in Beijing. One day Pingguo was assaulted by the owner of a foot bath business. An Kun regarded his wife Pingguo as “dirty” but made use of this “opportunity” to ask for twenty thousand Chinese yuan from the boss in compensation. His request was unsuccessful, he therefore

turned to the boss's wife and had sex with her out of revenge. When Pingguo and Kun resumed the relationship, Pingguo found herself pregnant, but Kun made use of another "opportunity" to blackmail the boss, lying that it was the owner that made her wife pregnant. Kun's scam was successful this time, but the only victim, Pingguo, was drummed into it. After the birth of the child, Kun received the money that the boss promised, but he regretted giving the boss the child. He wanted to take the child back to his hometown, humiliated and abused Pingguo, saying that she was a "bitch". But it was too late.

The movie is not only about money but also about the female as a whole, whose image is expressed in a repressed way. Pingguo's fate is so miserable that she is at the mercy of others, becoming leverage between two men who attach her fertility to trading. This is incontestably a practice of female objectification. In the meantime, she is oppressed by both of them — her greedy husband is eager for money while thinking Pingguo is "unclean", and the boss wants the child while humiliating her randomly. Only the boss's wife consoles Pingguo with tears and hand-shaking, which proves that only women understand and help each other and there is still a gender opposition between men and women. The movie tries to depict the hard situation of women, it is however still difficult for them to escape from reality and the exceedingly depressing environment. Women strive to rise, but a few of them still live in this predicament. This is what the movie has presented.

4.2. The Wandering Earth 2——Reshaping Stereotyped Female Image

In previous film and TV works, female characters are often shaped under the male gaze, leading to the formation of a more stereotypical image [8]. The recent premiere of *The Wandering Earth 2*, for example, endows many of its female characters with identities such as mother, wife, and daughter, brimming with heavy male-gazed connotations. Han Duoduo, the female character who has the most fighting scenes in the film, appears heroic. However, in the fantasy of a male character called Liu Peiqiang, she is shy and is forcibly given the image that she needs protection. This presentation directly reflects the authority of the male character, as the woman who is first gazed at cannot escape the fate of being protected after all. The contrast between boldness and shyness perfectly suits the male imagination and means that Han Duoduo, who fights for the rose, becomes the backdrop for the male heroism, setting up the heroic image of the male character as the guardian and defender, while the protected woman can only indulge in domesticity and exist as an agent for the male character.

There is a trend of highlighting female power and consciousness in recent film and TV productions, e.g., *Princess Agents*, *Story of Yanxi Palace*, some family dramas and so on. With the sharp rise in the number of domestic urban dramas, traditional male heroism is fading and is replaced by the image of growing women in the workplace. After observation and analysis, whenever feminism-related topics are addressed in recent years, the women portrayed in Chinese domestic film and TV works, no matter what the subject matter is, are bound to have a significant social status with extraordinary self-discipline, an enviable income, and a thunderous work attitude. It is not difficult to find that this type of successful female image is highly sought after by domestic audiences. Nevertheless, these females can be stigmatized and reshaped into another stereotyped image, i.e. women are becoming increasingly dominant and pushy. Take the female protagonist Andy in *Ode to Joy* as an example, she boasts a well-paying job, a beautiful appearance, superior intelligence and an independent personality, but what is attached to her is an irresistible lack of emotion and a frightening family genetic psychosis. The director of this TV drama attempts to portray a so-called "strong woman" image and promote feminism; in point of fact, however, they are deforming the female image. True feminism does not refer to those females who are materially abundant whilst emotionally deficient; instead, they can have diversified images and follow their heart to be whatever they want to be, rather than be imposed with a fixed impression that blindly implies that they are dominant and

pushy in the workplace and social relations. True feminist works are supposed to break the restrictions of the inherent definitions and stereotypes of females.

4.3. Desperate Husband——Using Stake Jokes and Metaphors to Avoid Sensitive Topics

Desperate Husband was about a man with a severe degree of machismo and a strong belief in male superiority. In parenting, he could be a deadbeat spouse and demand female employees to wear high heels at work and forces a pregnant employee to resign. He encountered time travel while riding in the elevator, and accidentally came to a world of reversed sex. In this world, women wore suits and drank cigars while men wore aprons learning baking. He could not accept this pain in any case and finally struggled to return to the original world. This movie, which seems to be a voice for women, and seems to be discussing the dilemmas of women, but everywhere is brimming with stereotypes. The director attempts to find a humorous way to start the narrative by concealing the sensitivity of the topic, i.e., the gender opposition. In the world of reversed sex, however, women are portrayed as domineering, pushy, stubborn, snoring in bed, and temperamental, which is undoubtedly an uglification and deformation of the female image. Looking at those men instead, they become dutiful, loyal, obedient husbands who stick to baking and childcare. Strictly speaking, the so-called gender transformation does not make sense substantively but on the contrary, deepens the agony of the female identity. Whether before or after the transformation, the female characters are doomed to be vulnerable and anaclitic. This is a comedy movie without many laughs, but with some unbelievable metaphors and humor, trying to evoke the empathy of female audiences. Presumably, the creator of this movie is constrained by some unspoken limitation, whereas I contend that it gives more of a feeling of male gazing that takes advantage of the female dividend.

5. Reflective Discourse on the Misrepresentation of Feminism in Film and TV

The current depiction of feminism in film and TV is anchored in two key aspects: accentuating the melancholic narratives of women to stimulate audience introspection, and sculpting formidable ‘powerful woman’ archetypes in professional environments. Regrettably, this representation can be seen as a distorted interpretation of the feminist ideology. The portrayals of these empowered women persist only in the context of establishing dominant personas in familial and professional settings, which is in itself a skewed representation. Despite this, such characterizations are fervently pursued, indirectly spotlighting the aspirations of ordinary women. When audiences encounter such purportedly feminist narratives, they may feel momentarily moved or invigorated, possibly envisioning an ideal lifestyle. However, if we disengage from the ‘powerful women’ facades crafted by directors like Andy and Tang Jing, we find that women in reality still endure substantial discrimination within the domestic and professional spheres.

The contemporary circumstances and pleas of Chinese women are not simply mirrored through narratives of extreme hardship or demonstrations of exceptional strength. The ideal of equality for women in professional contexts remains unfulfilled. Furthermore, true equality in varied domains such as family life, politics, and healthcare has not been achieved. However, these genuine pleas are often sidestepped in domestic film and TV productions which tend to manufacture distorted ‘feminist’ narratives, crafting an illusion of gender parity for audiences. As more directors recognize the potential advantages of incorporating feminism into their narratives to garner attention, it leads to a contortion of feminism. This trend not only fuels a surge of anti-feminist sentiment but also obscures the audience’s comprehensive understanding of feminism.

Feminism and gender equality are not merely about men and women sharing household chores or assuming equal responsibilities in a corporate setting. True equality should be conceptualized as a mutual understanding of gender parity by both men and women. It involves acknowledging and

respecting women's physiological limitations, treating both genders with objectivity and justice, and reducing gender conflict. Freedom does not signify that women must entirely forsake their families to pursue professional aspirations, nor does it endorse uninhibited expressions of opinion in every situation. It certainly does not mean belittling men or seeking solace in their distress. Such a misinterpretation of women's rights is inherently flawed. The notion of freedom within the feminist ideology must be gender-neutral. Individuals should have the liberty to make their own choices and decisions without being subject to societal prejudices or constrained by traditional mores. Only then can true freedom be achieved. Future Chinese feminist films must deeply explore and represent the pursuit of fairness and freedom in women's rights to truly reflect the essence of feminism.

It must be acknowledged that effecting change in the existing state of affairs is a challenging task in the short term. It necessitates the persistent and profound evolution of feminism, such that public understanding of women's independence and rights progresses. It is imperative for the public and filmmakers alike to understand that film and TV should not simply cater to market dynamics for economic gain, or trivialize feminism as a mere narrative hook. Instead, they should genuinely serve as conduits for women's authentic voices for truly exemplary feminist films and TV works.

6. Conclusion

This paper deploys a case-study methodology to scrutinize the evolution of feminism and the prevailing trend of distorted female portrayals in film and TV. It identifies three primary modes of distortion in the depiction of women in three mediums. The instantiation of gender dichotomy and deep-seated objectification of women, re-establishment of female stereotypes, and reliance on clichéd tropes and metaphors to sidestep sensitive topics. The depiction of women in these mediums is frequently disfigured and the genuine needs and aspirations of women are not authentically communicated. Film and TV productions should refrain from pandering to market trends, chasing high box-office or viewership statistics, or commodifying feminism for pecuniary gains. Instead, filmmakers ought to fathom the true essence of feminism, genuinely reflecting the authentic voices and demands of women, thereby producing truly commendable "feminist" film and TV productions.

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