Original Research Article

Female Images in Female-Directed Chinese Films.

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Abstract： This essay takes the representation of females in major Chinese female-directed films since the new period as the research subject. Until the development of Western feminist theory, female images in Chinese films were not studied critically. With the coming of a new period, accompanied by reform and women's liberation movement, the Chinese film industry has created a great number of new female images. These films highlight its charm as a visual media due to the handling of the female image on the screen; in the way filmmakers re-presented with greater awareness the importance of correctly introducing and handling female images on the screen.

Keywords： Female-Directed；Feminist；Chinese Films；Film screen

Feminism, as stated by Beasley (1999: 3), is: 'a range of political movements, ideologies, and social movements that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal, and social equality of sexes[1]. The liberation of Chinese women was attributed largely to the social changes in China and the influence of Western feminist movements. The main reason for this change is that Western feminist traditions cannot provide standardised answers to all women's issues in China; these issues are also caused by the differences in internal ethnic culture (Roves, 2010: 3).[2] It can be concluded that the Chinese feminist movement is an indigenised movement different from Western feminist movements.

Since the liberation of Chinese women is the result of Western feminist influences, the two have commonalities. China experienced wars of all sizes around the 20th century, for example, the May Fourth Movement of 1919, which was a student movement with female participation against Japanese imperialism in 1919 (Rowbotham, 1992: 210).[3] Although these wars caused various degrees of harm to China, they allowed for more foreign cultures to spread into the country and also helped Chinese women gain power in some respects.[4] Therefore, 'the literate Chinese citizen, particularly those in urban centres, were treated to a plethora of journals, newspapers and treatise on topics as diverse as free choice in marriage, lesbianism and modern family structures through to the rights of citizens' (Roves, 2010: 54).

Additionally, economic trade and investment by foreign countries brought many challenges and oppression to the feudal societies of early China. For example, 'Christian missionaries established schools and opposed the foot binding that hobbled Chinese women' (Rowbotham, 1992: 207). Christian missionaries in China were instrumental in both promoting women's education in China and facilitating their study abroad, while it laid the foundation for later female liberation in China. These factors have created opportunities for China to encourage many scholars to study abroad. They returned to China to organise a political and social reformation movement that focused on a women's rights to join the army. They were representative of female intellectuals whose self-liberation awareness gradually broke away from feudalism:

'international feminists also looked to China as a location to spread the word on women's rights. Birth control advocate Margaret Sanger visited China in March 1922 and spoke to enthusiastic, large gatherings' (Roves, 2010: 62).

It can be seen that these Western feminist theories empowered Chinese feminism and helped the movement to better integrate into national conditions and social culture to fight for women's rights and interests.

In the 1950s, the first female directors appeared after the founding of New China. For example, Wang Ping's The Story of Liubao Village (1957) describes a love story between military squad leader Li Jin and a rural girl in the Liubao area (Chen, 2013: 19). However, the films of female directors in this period often did not counteract mainstream ideologies, and ultimately exacerbated the issue of disregarding the power of women to speak for themselves.

The emergence of feminism in the 1960s not only provided a theoretical impetus for rewriting the history of female cinema but also broke the ceiling that hindered women from joining the film industry. By the mid-1980s, some Western feminist films and feminist film theories had been introduced to China. Under the influence of Western feminist theory and the Chinese women's liberation movement, more and more female workers entered both the film industry and the public eye[5]. Consequently, expressions of female consciousness in film gradually appeared on screen. Female directors boldly used female narrative discourse to compete with the traditional male narrative discourse, shooting many interpretations of female characters emphasising female consciousness.

In the 1980s, women in the Chinese film industry began to be more widely represented. As a representative female director, Huang Yuqin tried to deconstruct the traditional cultural system which focused on male rights, instead exploring women's self-awareness.

Her 1987 film Ghost Love was China's first female-directed film (Dai, 1994:43).[6] This film explains the cultural dilemmas of the modern Chinese woman through the life of a female opera singer, showing the world from her perspective.

Figure 1. Still from the *Ghost Love* (1987)

The film is based on female perspectives and completely defies the stereotypical female image at the time which was to satisfy masculine pleasures.[7] The film describes a female Peking opera actress, Qiu Yun, who plays a male role on stage to escape the fate of women. In other words, Ghost Love is about a woman disguised as a man to express female consciousness as a removable mask. The actress shows disproval of and submission to the mainstream consciousness while subverting the classic male-dominated culture and discourse. Qiu Yun by dressing as a man. This is an example of Butler's gender performativity theory (Horner, 2000: 1).in practice; gender involves people trying to imitate behaviours and thoughts of femininity or masculinity in order to produce a certain self-consciousness (Horner, 2000: 1)[8]. Thus, female visual representations in her films are different from male-directed representations based on male desires and the male gaze. Yuqin's portrayals of women often depict those who find it hard to choose between career and family conflicts. These film themes from the unique perspective of women express the life of women's characters, real emotions and desires, and expectations of the future, which can help give women more positive images.

Li Yu is a female director, representative at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century in China. Her 2005 film Dam Street is a social family ethics story (Meng, 2012: 10)[9]. It tells the story of heroine Yang Xiaoyun, who is suffering from an accidental pregnancy during her teenage years in the 1880s. When she marries she realises that she has become controlled by others; she decides to leave her hometown and dissolve her marriage. Although Yang Xiaoyun does not have the right to speak in love and marriage, her female consciousness grows gradually. Additionally, Yang Xiaoyun has been singing songs at the stage under the sight of people, at the beginning of that period, she would abuse softly to show her dissatisfaction while left numbly at last, which shows the tiny mental process of the change from humiliation to numb when the female was being watched.

The film avoids the aforementioned discourse trap of women being seen as an object while calmly demonstrating the realities of the objectification of women by transforming traditional cinematography. It also shows the relationship between seeing and being seen in a patriarchal society (Lu, 2017: 11)[10]. Simultaneously, Dam Street focuses on social realities and women's consciousness, describing women's living conditions and inner emotional entanglements (even women who exist on the edge of society) from multiple angles.

The Western feminist movement has given female directors a radical creative perspective. It has enabled examination of gender and social culture from a female standpoint and emphasises women's personal experiences to establish equal cultural relationships between men and women. Irrespective of the director, films of the 1980s and 1990s did not completely break through the patriarchal zeitgeist. However, their films reflected the position of women and their collective consciousness, allowing women to have more possibilities and space to express themselves.

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