

Chinese Contemporary Idealized Female Image under "Sister Culture"——Within a Case Analysis of "Love Myth"

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Abstract. The 2021 female-directed film "*Love Myth*" has created many buzzwords and is regarded as a phenomenon-level work of current feminist films. This article takes the "*Love Myth*" as a case study. Through the deconstruction of the ideal female image in the film, it analyzes the development of the latest feminist image in the current Chinese popular industry under the influence of China's "sister culture" (After 2020, "sister" has become an idealized image in the hearts of Chinese middle-class women, representing that a middle-aged woman can still maintain beauty, fulfill her own career pursuits, and fulfill the social expectations of being a good mother and a virtuous wife). Through discourse research, it is demonstrated that the female images in the film present a mixed pseudo-feminist temperament. Behind its discourse are the narratives of post-feminism, neo-liberal feminism, and pop feminism based on China's unique social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. Although this female image presents the temperament of female empowerment, it does not touch any deep social structural problems in essence.

Keywords: "*Love Myth*", Sister Culture, Pseudo-Feminist, Female Empowerment.

1. Introduction

"*Love Myth*" is a female group portrait film created by Chinese post-90s female directors. Because of its bold and witty language, it will receive a lot of attention in 2021 and become the highest-scoring Chinese domestic film in 2021 [1]. Since China's reform and opening up, the marketization of the economy has aroused the need for a middle-class consumption revolution, resulting in the commercialization of gender [2]. The arrival of the "she economy" in 2017 announced the era of women as the main consumers. The Chinese film industry has also begun to pay attention to the needs of female audiences, resulting in the explosive growth of Chinese Chick Flicks. But with the further awakening of women's sovereignty consciousness in China, a post-feminist temperament reproduced by the West can no longer meet the needs of middle-class women in China. After the reality show "Sister Riding the Wind and Waves" became popular in 2020, there has been an upsurge of "Sister Culture" in China. "Sister" has become a popular image of Chinese middle-class women, which embodies a mixed temperament of post-feminism, neo-liberal feminism, and popular feminism. On this basis, "*Love Myth*" has changed the consistent Chick Flicks strategy, shifting its attention from young people to the love of middle-aged people who have more consumption power.

It was unanimously praised by mainstream voices; they praised the female empowerment embodied in the characters. But it is still necessary to analyze the deep meaning behind the idealized female image constructed by the film through critical thinking. This article first proves the rationality and effectiveness of the case study through theoretical support, and secondly, through the discussion of the literature of previous scholars, it is clear that it still needs research, no matter the current exploration of this case or the latest development of feminism in China's popular industry. The third part clarifies the development context and causes of the ideal female image of the current "sister" culture through the actual living conditions of Chinese women and the development process presented on the screen. The fourth part discusses the development of its film genre after the "sister" culture by discussing the similarities and differences between this case and traditional Chinese chick flicks. In the last part, the research adopts the method of discourse research to explore how the film presents an idealized female image through discourse and dissects the mixed feminist temperament behind its narrative. Through this case study, the author tries to explore the latest process of the development of feminist images in the current Chinese popular industry.

2. The Rationality and Significance of This Case Analysis

The representation theory of Stuart Hall is the basic theory of this article, which proposes that the image presented by the media to the audience is a reconstruction of the real world, rather than a copy of the real situation [3]. All people, groups, or organizations in contemporary society live in a world constructed by the media, surrounded by 24-hour oversaturated information. Representation becomes the norm of people's behavior [4]. The media's construction theory of reality warrants the legitimacy of this case study. It can be clearly concluded that the feminist image presented to the audience in the movie "Myth of Love" is not a reflection of the factual image of Chinese women, but a female carnival created by the Chinese media to cater to middle-class women.

In terms of the construction of female images, the output of the image by the media to the audience contains the advocacy of national ideology and the social requirements for female values. The media determines how people view gender issues and how gender is constructed [5]. The images of women presented in the film and the lines in it are widely disseminated and positively received among Chinese women in 2022, giving meaning to this case study. The things presented by the media are more controlled by groups with the right to speak, which is closely related to social class [3]. This means that the ideal female image created by the film reflects deep-seated issues such as the current economic stage, gender structure, and social class in China. Therefore, it is very meaningful to deconstruct the image of the female group presented in the film and analyze the social value system behind it.

3. The Absence of Critical Thinking and Native Discourse Context

Feminist theory is constantly updated and developed, communicating and changing in different cultural and social backgrounds in various countries. In the course of its development, it even crosses the traditional class, race, and sexual orientation [6]. Based on the development of feminist theory, there are factors that affect each other in the context of globalization, but they have their own development paths and track under different social, historical, cultural, and economic backgrounds. In this section, the author will first anchor the core narratives of feminist theory that this article focuses on (post-feminism, neoliberal feminism, popular feminism). Secondly, the author will discuss the research results of scholars in this case study or related feminist topics and propose research gaps in this field. Finally, the author will put forward the research direction.

When current Chinese scholars analyze the female images in the "Love Myth", they generally emphasize the post-feminist identity constructed by the female characters [7]. And they greatly appreciate the behavior of the female group portraits in the film to arbitrarily choose their own lives. Jie (2022) proposes that the female empowerment shown in the film is a true reflection of real life in Shanghai, China, and believes that this female power discourse is a questioning and subversion of male privilege [8]. However, the current case studies by Chinese scholars, only support the female empowerment constructed by this film (especially women's free mastery of the body and sexual empowerment) with a positive attitude, without bringing in critical thinking. In fact, the opposite of self-advocacy in post-feminism is a self-defining political purpose [9]. Its function allows women to expand their understanding of the personal realm and focus more on their own life and emotions, thereby distracting women from attention to the deep-level social problems brought about by gender injustice. Not only that, there are a large number of core views of neoliberal feminism and popular feminism in the discourse and female image of this case, which has not been paid attention to by scholars. The author will expand on these points in a detailed analysis of the film.

Beyond that, post-feminism is often seen as a middle-class white existence that promotes a sense of leisure in life and consumption as a productive strategy [10]. Although Gill (2019) proposes that post-feminism can be communicated with women of different classes and races on a global basis [11]. However, under Chinese unique political, economic, and cultural background, the current stage of feminism development and the class of subject discourse in China is very different from those in Western countries [12]. However, the current domestic scholars' case studies on the "Love Myth" are

only copies of the core concepts of post-feminism, looking for internal similarities with Western theories, without considering the context of Chinese feminist discourse. Therefore, the author thinks there is still a large research gap in the feminist research on the "*Love Myth*" of this case.

In the research, the author will retain the relational understandings and core discourses of Western post-feminism, neoliberal feminism, and popular feminism. The author will focus on the corresponding changes and development in China and pay more attention to the discourse background and material conditions of China. What's more, the author will explore the deep-level problems of social, economic, and cultural factors behind the film's discourse.

4. The Image of Women on the Screen: The Changing Living Conditions of Women in China

Before proceeding with the case study, it should be clear that the main female images in the current Chinese popular media industry are more Chinese middle-class women. And this change in the choice of women's images on the screen is a reflection of the changes in the living conditions of Chinese women and the variation in society's needs for women. In order to show the hidden social, economic, cultural, and other factors of the female characters constructed in the case of "*Love Myth*", this part will be based on the historical track of time, presenting the actual living conditions of Chinese women and the corresponding female images on the screen, and finally focusing on the present, the development of neoliberal feminism and popular feminism, targeting middle-class women in China.

4.1 From the Beginning of the 20th Century to the Early Days of the Founding of China

In the early twentieth century, the issue of women's liberation was put on the agenda and became part of the process of modernization of the Chinese nation. In the film discourse of this period, women were always the objects of oppression, both mentally and physically [13]. After 1949, in the early days of China's founding, in order to promote social production, women were urged to leave the family and enter the public sphere, in exchange for equal rights for women. However, the women in the films of this period were all genderless, and they were all images of devotion to the country and the revolution at any time. In fact, the early women's liberation was carried out under the proposal of men, and its evaluation criteria were also determined with the approval of the male privileged class. "Male standards were used as the norm to regulate the female experience [14]".

4.2 Post-feminism and Neo-liberal Feminism Brought about by China's Reform and Opening-up Policy

Since China's reform and opening up, economic development has brought about social stratification. A large number of female factory workers are facing layoffs due to gender issues and are called to return to their families [15]. Correspondingly, the elite middle-class women in the city, under the influence of post-feminist temperament, begin to advocate freedom of choice and self-improvement [16]. Gender studies in this period mainly aimed at middle-class women, avoided discussing the unequal rights and interests of politics and gender, and advocated female self-expression as a discourse strategy. The female image on the screen experienced a revival of "feminine consciousness" during this period [17].

Although China implements a socialist economic system with Chinese characteristics, with the development of economic globalization, the idea of the neoliberal economy has also entered China [18]. But it is diametrically opposed to the development path of Western countries. China's neoliberal economy promotes the emergence of Chinese individualism. At the same time, a pseudo-feminist proposition—neoliberal feminism began to spread wildly among middle-class women in China [19]. Neo-liberal feminism emphasizes women's "self", which not only includes taking on everything in life but also refuses to admit that their "self" will be shaken by external factors such as society [6]. Not only that, under the long-term influence of Confucian culture, Chinese women have been emphasized in their roles as "virtuous wives and good mothers". Their roles as caregivers and bearers

in the family are continuously strengthened [20]. This all fits at the core discourse of neoliberal feminism, the work-family balance. Women are required to make contributions to society and undertake their own family missions. Once career women fail to complete their task of starting a family, society will start to urge women to marry. And when they are over 30 years old, they are derogatorily classified as the "shengnv" group (leftover women) [12]. In Chinese society at this stage, patriarchy began to become stronger again [13]. The female images in the films of this historical period often become victims in the social reality of the alternation of old and new eras. Regardless of individual female efforts, men seem to continue to play a significant role in determining women's fate, for good or for bad.

4.3 The Popular Feminism of Gender Commodification

The "consumption revolution" that emerged in China in the 1990s has made female empowerment closely associated with terms such as wealth and consumption [21]. The spread of neoliberal feminism among middle-class women has helped to establish a more prosperous context for popular feminism in the media and popular culture [22]. Most of today's media products are the result of capitalization, and feminism has become a perfect selling point for middle-class women in China. The female group in the film is shaped according to the needs of the market, and its core is a concept of gender commodification. Through in-depth analysis of it, people can see more profound changes in Chinese society, culture, and ideological patterns.

5. From Chinese Chick Flicks to "Sister" Style Chick Flicks

As mentioned above, in the discussion of the case *"Love Myth"*, most Chinese scholars pay more attention to and praise female empowerment (the freedom of middle-aged women in relationships) and regard it as the latest exploration of Chinese female directors in a new generation. This research proposes that although the film introduces some new changes (incorporating the core of sister culture), the film is always explored within the framework of Chinese Chick Flicks (whether in male character construction or in the setting of urban landscapes). This part will reflect the feminist changes in China's past ten years, from the "she economy" to the "Sister Culture", by exploring the similarities and differences between this case and the traditional Chinese Chick Flicks genre.

5.1 Age Expansion of Female Roles under "Sister Culture"

Under the influence of the "she economy", China introduced the western Chick Flick genre and started to create its own local Chick Flick (called "Xiaoni" film). In Chinese, "Xiaoni" means young women, and in fact, its target consumer group is also this part of the female audience [23]. At the moment of "sister" culture, the "love myth" has broadened the level of the female audience. In the construction of female protagonists, it is not the 20-year-old novice in the workplace, but the 30-to 40-year-old "sisters" who have experienced many life experiences. However, it has never broken through the narrative frame and purpose of Chick Flick itself—a comedy-oriented commercial movie tailored to attract women [24]. With a relaxed atmosphere, let women pay attention to the pursuit of love, romantic relationships, and marriage. Not only that, but it closely embodies the post-feminist narrative.

5.2 A Continuation of the Traditional Chick Flick: Improved Men and the Global Metropolis

In addition, in order to attract female audiences, the male image in traditional Chinese Chick Flick is set as a perfect male with an improved temperament [12]. They generally fit the "Gaofushuai" fantasy of young Chinese girls (that is, a single male with good looks and great wealth). And they are different from the Chinese "Zhinan" in real life ("Zhinan" refers to a male figure who does not understand gentleness, consideration, and machismo). These fantasy male characters often assume a kind of caregiver role. However, this role is often seen by the audience as a performance that is out of touch with reality. In *"Love Myth"*, the construction of the male protagonist "Bai" clearly optimizes

this traditional chick fantasy. As a middle-aged man in his forties, he has his own flaws that bring humanity and vitality to the character. But he still conforms to the improved masculinity and is good at cooking, manages his life in an orderly manner, and is not only gentle but can also help the heroine take care of the children. In terms of money, in Shanghai, where everyone is struggling, he has realized the freedom of wealth through his father's property. Most importantly, he listens and reflects when confronted with a "sister culture" style of female characters who denounce men.

In the setting of urban space, traditional Chinese Chick Flick lack localized scenes. It is more about implanting the western urban landscape into the story, highlighting a privileged class identity. Chinese scholars see it as an idealized endorsement of exotic cultures [25]. In *"Love Myth"*, the director cleverly integrated the global style with the local scene and chose Shanghai as the background of the story. Taking advantage of the city's status as an international metropolis, the unrealistic sense of luxury brought about by consumer culture is eliminated. The film builds "petty bourgeoisie culture" into a synonym for Shanghai. Even shoe repairers still have their own daily coffee time. At the same time, after a few choices are made, the daily life snippets enhance the fireworks of local Chinese life. However, in the construction of these urban lives, the middle class is always regarded as the audience. Not only does it highlight the fantasy of a special life, but the image of the bottom laborers completely disappears in the city.

6. Analysis of the Female Image in the "Love Myth"

6.1 Research Method

The purpose of this study is to reveal the female image embodied in the "Love Myth", analyze its construction process, and the deep social meaning behind the female image. The author analyzed all the text in the entire movie (112 minutes), including movie lines, and text settings on the movie screen. In the text analysis below, this section only presents key discourses relevant to the purpose of the study. And the author adopts the method of Snapshot Study to focus on the current social, economic and cultural background of China with a more representative sample. When researchers pay more attention to social salient phenomena rather than the sample size, they tend to get more typical results [26].

In terms of research methods, the following uses a qualitative research method, using Critical discourse analysis to explore the texts that appear in the film. Based on constructivist epistemology, it is clear that discourse is constructed by those in power under unique social conditions. The idealized female image presented in the film was constructed by the media to maintain the ideology and social status of the privileged class [4]. Not only that, but this purpose can also be achieved through metaphors in text and language [27]. Therefore, the author adopts Fairclough's three-level text analysis method and combines it with the contemporary social context of China. The following uses the unique characteristics of CDA through three dimensions (text, discourse, and social culture) to reveal the constructed female groups and discourse strategies in the film.

6.2 Discourse Research on Idealized Female Images

After the popularity of "sister culture", the director used discourse to construct an idealized image of advanced women in *"Love Myth"* (no social or environmental factors can affect women; they are stronger than men, and they can live their own lives presumptuously and wonderfully) and tried to show that contemporary Chinese women have gained gender equality and discourse power [28]. But in fact, wrapped in the constructed female characters is a mixture of pseudo-feminist temperament. The following sections will conduct an in-depth analysis of the text in the film, and discuss the three themes of sexual empowerment, the inversion of the image of men and women in traditional impressions, and the self-contradiction of idealized female images.

6.2.1 Sexual empowerment

The use of text to show lust is a part that cannot be ignored in the *"Love Myth"*. All sexual invitations in the film are made by female characters. At the beginning of the film, Ms. Li proposed "have a drink and go to your home." The shortest and most powerful words show the sexual empowerment of modern Chinese urban women. Not only that, after Lao Bai had sex with Gloria, Gloria even "transferred money" to Lao Bai on the grounds of buying a painting. Gloria said in the dialogue: "For last night, I must transfer money to you." The director constructs women's complete control and dominance over sex, in order to deny that "sexual politics" still exists in the Chinese middle-class female. "Sex can exist, men can not exist" [27]. Women's sexual pleasure and sexual liberation have become important proof of women's empowerment, which runs through the film's post-feminist discourse. In addition, by emphasizing the discourse theme of "women dominate everything", the film highlights the personal responsibility system of women's choices. Its essence is the advocacy of neoliberal feminism for women's self-responsibility. But Rottenberg argues that the purpose of promoting this neoliberal feminism is to ease tensions within the neoliberal economy [22].

The female character Gloria has the typical characteristics of Chinese neo-liberal feminism, "I am now in the best state of a woman, with money and leisure, and my husband is missing." In her discourse, she embodies the female image of successful entrepreneurship in neo-liberal feminism. Wu & Dong (2018) call it entrepreneurial C-fem [15]. Behind her discourse is the pursuit of maximizing utilitarianism, just focusing on personal financial interests. But in order to achieve the ultimate pursuit, this kind of pseudo-feminism often conforms to the expectations of heterosexual patriarchy and becomes an accomplice of patriarchal privileges. In *"Love Myth"*, it is more reflected in the backlash of this type of female image after becoming a "sister" and completing basic economic accumulation (acting like traditional patriarchy).

6.2.2 The inversion of the image of men and women in traditional impressions

The director deliberately set up a reversal of the traditional images and behaviors of men and women. After Gloria had a one-night stand with Lao Bai, she said to Lao Bai: "You think too much. Do you need to be so serious?". The text in the soundtrack at this time is that the woman is singing "I only borrow one night of your life", and the young boy handsomely at the wine party has become the plaything of the "sisters". This is the transplantation of the images and behaviors of patriarchy in traditional film narratives on women. Not only that, but such character constructed appears in all the women in the film. After Miss Li had sex with Lao Bai, the man carefully prepared breakfast for the woman, but Miss Li sneaked away. Or Lao Bai's ex-wife, Peipei, when expressing her infidelity error with righteous words: "I just made a mistake that all men make." These discourses and scenes are popular descriptions of middle-aged men in the context of traditional Chinese society. And the film uses this construction to convey that women have fully realized the awakening of individualism. Not only have they overthrown male hegemony, but they are even the ones who really hold the initiative. In the film, men like Lao Bai gather in the grocery store to discuss "cooking skills", while women like Miss Li scold male subordinates for their incompetence in the "workplace". In this idealized feminist image construction, women become their own "gods" [29].

6.2.3 The self-contradiction of idealized female images

The film constantly emphasizes the empowerment of female characters in its construction. And in the movie lines, female characters are used to counter the double restraint of Chinese professional women by neo-liberal feminism after the "she economy" so as to create a popular feminist temperament. But behind its discourses reveals its own contradictions, and downplays the real plight of women in real life.

Neo-liberal feminism emphasizes that professional women should achieve a balance between family and career, and calls on women to be the identities of procreators and nurturers, thereby binding women. The first climax of the film comes from the ridicule of the female characters' demands from social traditions. They made a sentence with "A woman who has not done XX in her life is incomplete" (emphasizing it by using the rhetoric of parallelism), and said: "I will make up this

kind of nonsense." Behind this counterattack is actually Neo-liberal feminism denies the concept that society, all external environments, and other factors have an impact on the female agency. In addition, its deep-level purpose is to use popular feminism to gain the support of Chinese middle-class women, and to use feminism as a selling point to achieve economic success. Yet for popular feminism, visibility is its only pursuit. The idealized feminism in the film will not challenge any deep hegemony power. When audiences see popular feminist discourse appearing in media products, they mistakenly think that patriarchy has been changed [22].

In fact, in order to maximize the excitement of female audiences, the film deliberately avoids talking about real-life dilemmas in women's lives. However, the contradictions of the constructed idealized female image are still revealed in the details of the discourse. Whether it's Peipei's criticism of Gloria for "not having children" when she first met Gloria, or what she said when she defended her cheating, "No matter what happens outside, I always put my family first ". It always reflects that the restrictions of neo-liberal feminism on women have been rooted in their concepts, making women themselves the defenders of the gender order. In addition, Ms. Li's concern for the real "age" also reflects that the seemingly free and easy middle-class professional women have never been able to get out of the haze of patriarchy.

7. Conclusion

This article takes the movie "*Love Myth*" as a case study, and analyzes the latest development of feminist images in the current Chinese popular industry by deconstructing its idealized female images. Under the influence of the "sister culture" of consumerism, this study proposes that current Chinese feminism presents a mixed feminist temperament.

In the process of research, based on the perspective of historical and social development, it is demonstrated that the presentation of female images on the screen is based on the requirements for women in the stage of social development. At the moment when the consumption revolution and the commercialization of gender continue to evolve, middle-class women have become the main consumption targets of the film industry. And "sister culture" invades the typical movie genre (Chick Flick) under "she economy". Although there are some expansive changes in the film (such as the addition of more female empowerment discourses and the middle-class female narrative of "sisters"), its thematic framework is always similar to the traditional setting of Chick Flick, no matter the improved temperament of male characters, or the globalized urban landscape.

Not only that, but this article also conducts an in-depth analysis of the discourse of the film. By emphasizing women's sexual empowerment, this case shows that middle-class women in China can decide everything arbitrarily and become the masters of their own lives. In fact, it embodies the narrative of "self-control happiness" advocated by neoliberal feminism. On this basis, the film has constructed the theme of deliberately inverting the traditional images of men and women on the screen. This is to show that Chinese women have achieved equal power and are even stronger than men in many ways. However, in the details of the film, it is still impossible to get rid of the self-contradiction of its idealized female image. The film's seemingly empowering discourse is actually a popular feminist strategy. Its purpose is by emphasizing the breakthrough of the traditional female paradigm to attract the attention of middle-class women and ease the social tension caused by women's gender inequality in real life. Neoliberal feminism eased the internal pressure of the neoliberal economy by emphasizing "self-control of happiness" and transforming government responsibility into personal responsibility. It makes female viewers mistakenly think that they have broken through male hegemony and achieved complete equality, and only focus on personal topics such as love and marriage. This film, as a commodity of a popular industry, is filled with hybrid pseudo-feminist discourse. This film uses it as a strategy to attract progressive women in China, so that they subtly accept the feminist image needed by capital. Its nature does not touch the deep social problems and economic inequality.

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