

Study on the "Gender Misplaced" Characters in Chinese Comedies

-- The case by Mahua Funage Films

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Abstract: In 2015, with the expansion of the Chinese film, comedy films gradually gained popularity among the public due to its relaxed cheerful styles, those film also suitable for all ages. Moreover, comedy genres has been continuously changing in response to market requirement. However, following the rise as one of the most favored genres, comedies' merits were increasingly exploited for commercial purposes. Consequently, an influx of low brow and crude comedic works results in a decline of indigenous comedic films' quality. This paper focuses on Mahua Funage Films, the representative of Chinese comedic films, gained exceptional success and have positive reception by audiences from 2015 to 2023. According to Maoyan film rankings (film statistics website in China), among the top 30 domestic comedy films in recent years, there are 9 films in which Mahua Funage (including the production team or actors) participated, and the scores are as high as 9.1, achieving in both box office and reputation in nearly 5 years. Notably, some of Mahua Funage's films related to the themes of "Gender Misplacement". Thus, this paper aims at scrutinizing portrayals with "gender misplaced" in Mahua Funage's comedies while delving into historical background behind their comic allure and analyzing factors contributing the decline of the reputation by abusing "gender misplaced".

Keywords: Comedy Films; Feminism; Gender Misplacement; Gender Ideology; Mahua FunAge.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Significance

Since 2015, there has been a surge in growth within domestic comedic films quantity although the quality still declining conversely. For creating more laughing points and punchlines, some comedy film prefer to use the plots of gender, men dressed as women or some characters act as effeminate men and masculine women, those situation often referred to as "Gender Misplacement" in this paper.

Contrasting with traditional Chinese operas or early Chinese films, some of contemporary comedic films' "gender misplacement" involves deliberate adoption of awkward behaviors coupled with exaggerated makeup, ugly hair-style, the purpose is that exaggerating the differences and contradictions between male and female, the awkward circumstance of characters always make audience laugh.

The concept of "gender misplacement" has several functions: firstly, it uses comic and humorous language and behavior to challenge gender stereotypes, highlight the contradictions and differences between male and female roles, and prompt audiences to contemplate on gender issues. For example, in comedy films "Wife and Husband (2017, Italy film)", "Never Say Die (2017, Chinese film)" and "Papa to Musume no Nana-Kakan (2007, Japanese TV series)," characters gradually know each other's hearts, empathizing with other's perspective in order to achieve male and female reconciliation in different relationship. Secondly, certain films use attention-grabbing tactics by some ridiculous and weird gender misplaced behaviors. For example, the portrayal of transgender Meng Tejiao in "Goodbye Mr. Loser (2015, Chinese film)" serving only as a source of humor without any reason or background. In "Hello, Mrs. Money (2018, Chinese

film)," there are some cross-dressing plot which further aggravates stereotypes about female by emphasizing body like 'big breasts,' 'blonde hair,' 'slender waist,' and 'long legs', thereby reinforcing public misconceptions about femininity.

According to the Maoyan film ranking, from 2015 to 2023, Mahua Funage produced 9 of the top 30 domestic comedy films in recent years, each with a score exceeding 9.1, achieving both box office and audience success over a five-year period. Furthermore, Mahua Funage's films also involved plots of "gender misplacement". Therefore, this paper focuses on analyzing the portrayal of "gender misplaced" in comedy films in Mahua Funage Film as cases study. This paper aims to explore the historical evolution and comedic essence of this theme.

Ultimately, this paper endeavors to provide insights into repose the current challenges associated with portraying "gender misplaced" in comedies and seeks to establish a balance between humor and respect.

1.2. Definitions

Gender Misplacement: the meaning of gender misplacement in this paper is expression and behavior of biological gender show a deviation comparing with general. When searching the articles related to gender misplacement, it is inevitable to find that in psychology and psychiatry, it denotes that an individual's inability to identify with their biological gender, leading to deviate from traditional societal rules.[1] This paper focuses on analyzing the values and ideologies expressed by gender misplacement characters in Chinese comedic films during performance, categorizing them into three genres: Cross-dressing, gender exchange or behavior like opposite gender.

Cross-dressing: the meaning in this paper is actors wearing clothing associated with the opposite gender. This historical

term come from Chinese opera, where male disguise themselves as female for opera performance, such as “Nandan” and “Kunsheng”.

1.3. Literature Reviews

In this paper, the analysis of gender images in comedy films is predominantly based on China's national context. Primarily focusing on domestic comedy films, with an emphasis on themes such as "domestic comedy," "gender misplacement," "transgender" and "Mahua Funage." Foreign literature researches mostly focus on "feminism," "gender performance," and "masculinity." The main discussion is around comedy films produced by Mahua Funage Film, so relevant literature is sought using keywords such as "Mahua Funage" and the names of associated comedy films and comedians. While there is a mountain of researches and critical analyses about "comedy film" and "gender" within Chinese academics, fewer resources addressing topics like "gender misplacement in comedy" or exploring feminism in comedic contexts. Following extensive data collection, organization, and analysis, relevant research literature is categorized to facilitate further comprehensive discussion.

(1) Research on the development of Chinese comedy films

In the History of Chinese Comedy Film, Professor Rao Shuguang from China Film Art Research Center provides a comprehensive overview of Chinese comedy films from the early 20th century to the 21st century.[2] This paper primarily focuses on the low-budget "grassroots" comedy from 2015 to 2023. Consequently, the historical insights presented in this book hold significant scholarly value for this study.

In Wu's article "Entertainment Demands and Moral Adherence of Contemporary Comedy Films," he delineates the development of domestic comedy films as follows: during the 1980s and 1990s, there was an influx of Stephen Chow's absurd "Hong Kong comedy" and American humor from foreign comedies. Simultaneously, in the 1990s, Chen Peisi further delved into exploring the essence of domestic comedy. In the 2000s, Feng Xiaogang's "Feng Family" comedies emerged as prominent contributions to comedic films. Additionally, Wu contends that Crazy Stone (2006) pioneered a shift towards grassroots storytelling within comedic narratives; subsequently leading up to stars like Xu Zheng and Huang Bo dominating with high-budget comedies until 2015. Notably, Mahua Funage disrupted the monopoly held by big-name comedies through three small-budget productions. Post-2017 saw a convergence between comedy and various film genres giving rise to hybrid films such as *Monster Hunt* and *Gallop*—indicative of an evolving landscape characterized by comedic films diversity.[3]

In his journal article titled "Updated Observations of Films in the Audience-Oriented Era," Professor Chen Xuguang offers detailed insights into how domestic comedy films have evolved by 'Internet'. Comedic films change within audience aesthetic expectations, cultural commercialization and consumerism by contemporary developments. Furthermore, continuous integration with other subcultures and film genres has given rise to the new styles of domestic comedic films, this phenomenon is not negative.[4]

The narrative structure and artistry of domestic comedy have undergone significant evolution throughout the development of domestic comedy films. Within the academics, there has been a profound discussion on the core value of comedy films, particularly in terms of their artistic qualities. For instance, Luo Xianyong's work "The Aesthetic

and Imperfection in the Low Budget Chinese Comedy Movies" delves into the comedic core and spirit conveyed by contemporary small-budget comedies from a film aesthetics perspective.[5] Similarly, Wang Tao's dissertation "The context of visual culture research China mad comedy movies spectacle" explores the significance of "carnival" in present-day comedies through visual culture way. Furthermore, Xian Jia's comprehensive analysis based on the film "Never Say Die" concludes that for a comedy to be successful, it must first evoke joy within its audience at its most fundamental level; [6] additionally, it should elicit comic emotions and prompting reflection through narratives reflecting real-life content.[7]

After 2015 critiques surrounding domestic comedic film have been marked instantly owing to escalating market requirements and box-office which lead to significant changes in both narrative structures as well as artistic merit of comedic films. Notably cited by Wu Yu was consumerism and audience needs had eroded both moral integrity & aesthetic worth of comedic works, becoming a commercial interests.[3] Scholars Rao Shuguang & Jia Xuexi point directly that pay too much attention to worthless joke but not substantive values represents that the director disregards cinematic art and treats these creations merely like a simple performance.[8]

Assessments of both merits & shortcomings in Mahua Funage films have been subject extensive scrutiny by academics. Zhou Siyi, in his work titled "The Collision between Brand and Audience: Reviewing Happy Fried Dough Twists Films", dissects why Mahua Funage film ceased attraction with audience.[9] Likewise, Li Chun, a faculty member at Communication University China points that films need to focus on structural narratives and foundational creative elements but not on Commercial function.[10]

It's notable that most of discussions in comedic films' papers prefer to focus on values and meanings. However, there is a need for deeper exploration into issues such as gender stereotypes, femalism and LGBTQ, however those contents often dismissed as entertainment, neglecting their societal influence.

(2) Research on the use of "Gender Misplacement" in creations

The evolution of the concept of "gender misplacement" in literature has undergone significant historical changes. Li Hua's work, "On the Gender Misplacement of the Main Characters in Ming and Qing Dynasty Talented and Beautiful Novels," highlights that as early as the Ming and Qing Dynasties, there were indications of an emerging form of "gender misplacement" within literatures: talented men owned delicate features and soft characteristics, while women exhibited masculine "literary talent." [11] With the introduction of Western ideas, a gradual dislocation between biological gender and social gender became apparent, particularly evident in early 21st-century film productions. In Luo Xiner's article "The "Body Mismatching" in Performance in Hong Kong Films: A Cultural Analysis (1997-Present)," Liu Yue-e from *The Lion Roar* is used as an example to analyze "gender misplacement" through the lens of female masculinity in behavior and personality. At the onset of the 21st century, female characters depicted in Hong Kong films displayed strength, courage, and reliability—a stark contrast to weak male figures during this period. Within Hong Kong's film industry traditionally dominated by male prominence over females, this period witnessed the breakthrough of female characters.[12]

Different from the "gender cross-dressing" performances in

ancient literature, Chinese opera, and Hong Kong films, contemporary small-budget comedy films seem to place gender in the context of binary opposition, which not only aggravates gender stereotypes, but also puts the possibility of gender diversity in a very awkward position and marginalizes LGBTQ.

In comedy films, the entertainment content such as skits and jokes are poured into the creation of movies, and the framework of ugliness is gradually built. One of the opinions is: that ugliness is simply to make people laugh. It is worth mentioning that when the film reveals more ugliness, it is easy to cause some audience to have cognitive bias, misreading "the revelation of ugliness" as "the promotion of ugliness".[10]

It is worth noting that in the context of Chinese films market, the complexity of cross-dressing performance makes us realize that when we apply the Western gender performance theory, we must consider its applicability in the special situation of China and need to integrate more local experience.

Feminist research in "cross-dressing" and "gender misplacement". The types of gender misplaced is very large, in addition to the more typical "cross-dressing" - men dressed as women, women dressed as men, there are similar transgender, "sissy", "tomboy" and other image. This paper will classify the different types, and then analyze the gender performance of the gender roles. In the plot of women dressing as men, Zhu Jialine believes that "female have internalized the male worship under the oppression of the male-dominated society for thousands of years, the psychology of envy for male identity, thus leads to the illusion of men when women construct their self-identity." It is the result of deep-rooted female worship of men and advanced mass media in a consumer society."[1]

In addition, Wang Lei, Zhu Wenwen and Chang Bo discussed queer theory in their Research on Gender Cross-dressing Images and Social Tension in Media. Although foreign queer theories are more connected with cross-border concepts in other conceptual fields to deal with critical or political issues, the author believes that in the Chinese context, it is more depoliticized and non-critical, and the sense of queer attributes is not strong. At present, transgender performances in the mass media and popular culture focus on entertainment, aesthetics/ugliness, without the slightest provocation. In other words, China's gender transgression shows do not attempt to challenge existing boundaries, and the gender division between male and female is only literally transgressed.[13]

Because there are many ways to express "gender misplacement" in the films, this paper choose three different forms in the three Mahua Funage films: transgender, gender exchange, cross-dressing. However, the film industry has not divided the "gender misplacement" on the type, for this reason, this paper will researches and classifies the more typical and common "gender misplacement" situation in domestic comedies.

(3) Others

In addition, this paper will also pay attention to gender performance, gender image in the media, and analyze the theories of mass psychology and consumerism from the perspective of the audience.

1.4. Research Theories

Gender performance is an important theory by Judith Butler.[14] She proposed that the psychological gender of the

subject is not fixed, but has fluidity and performativity. Gender performance is influenced by social culture and historical background, forming different norms and expectations, gender performance also influenced by social power. With power and social requirements, people continue to play and imitate gender roles through symbolic systems such as behavior, speech, clothing and posture. In the three films of Mahua Funage, the social status and power of the roles of gender misplacement" are also constructed in the films, reflecting the creators' basic cognition and expectations.

In addition, this paper will also use the gaze theory to deconstruct characters in the film.[15] The "gender misplacement" characters set in the film have also become the objects of "being watched", the expression of those characters are often disciplined and monitored by the power, presenting certain stereotypes. For example, in "Hello, Mrs. Money", lady must be around blonde hair, big breasts, red lips.

2. Analyzing the History and Meaning of "Gender Misplacement" in Chinese Theater, Film, and Literature

As early as in the history of Chinese cultural creation, gender misplacement have a profound impact. This paper lists and analyzes the "gender misplacement" situation in literature, film from ancient times till now, and analyzes its significance and value.

Literature. The concept of cross-dressing can be found as early as ancient literature. In the poem "Mulan Ci" from the Southern and Northern Dynasties, it is expressed that Hua Mulan joined the army for her father. For this reason, she dressed up as a man and become a soldier. In The Butterfly Lovers of Jin Dynasty, one of the four great love stories in ancient China, Zhu Yingtai has to hide her daughter's identity for study in the school which only allows men participated. In the novel Zaishengyuan from Qing Dynasty, the heroine Meng Lijun also pretended to be a man for career. Most of these characters are female in ancient literature because of the historical conditions--women are mostly in the imprisonment of "only male can outsider for work or study". Such a move of "cross-dressing" can not only the development of the story, but also more reasonable. In addition, "cross-dressing" characters, such as Mulan and Meng Lijun, in a certain extent that break the feudal thought, praise the ancient women also have courage and talent.

Chinese opera. The more typical form of "cross-dressing" in opera is nothing more than "Qian Dan Kunsheng". Nan Dan (also known as Qian Dan) means that the male plays the female role, while the Kun Sheng is the female play male role. As early as the pre-Qin Dynasty or even earlier, "men dress for women" or "fake women" were very common in opera, for creating some joking and curious plots to attract the audience's interest, and in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, under the influence of feudal thought, female was strictly prohibited from participating in opera, because of it, some female roles in the opera rely on male to act, Nan Dan is still an important form of performance nowadays.[16] In the development of Nan Dan, men have more special advantages than women, such as voice strength, shape and physiological conditions for martial arts. The cross-dressing in Chinese opera become more and more professional, also create a a specific genre. the most of famous Peking Opera Nan Dan is Mei Lanfang.

Table 1. "Gender Misplacement" in Chinese literature, film and television works

Time	Form	Meaning	Type	Magnus
Northern and Southern Dynasties - Qing Dynasty	Women dressed as men	Due to the feudal rule that "men outside for work and women inside for family", women were not allowed to appear in public, so that some female had to pretend to male.	Literary fiction; Chinese opera.	Hua Mulan
Ming and Qing Dynasties	Men dressed as Women	From the Kang Hsi periods, female were forbidden to act, and the female roles in opera performances were replaced by men.	Traditional Peking Opera	The Butterfly Lovers
Modern	Men and women cross-dressing	1. In order to reproduce the history at that time, due to feudal rule, women were not allowed to go out, so the ancient puppet drama set up the women dressed as men; 2. The plot setting of some men and women's body exchange; 3. set the plot of cross-dressing, in order to reflect the concept of transgender; 4. review the ugliness, entertainment effect; 5. It has the significance of satirizing social reality.	Stage play; Movies and TV series; Short Video

Theatre. In domestic sketch and stage comedy performances, "cross-dressing" is a common comedic performance. The most classic is the Spring Festival held by China Central Broadcasting and Television in 2005, the sketch "Decoration" appeared a cross-dressing character, with funny hair and makeup, which make audience laugh loudly.

Movies and television. In film and television dramas, cross-dressing is more familiar to audience. Taking the as an example, the Legend of White Snake, in order to better fit the characters, director use a cross-dressing roles, by women playing the male lead in the drama, the play was a great success in that year. Coincidentally, the popular film "The Smiling Proud Wanderer, a Chinese swordplay film, director also boldly adopted female to act a male role, the purpose is female can show both masculine and tenderness.

Short video. At present, in some media platforms such as Douyin (Chinese Tik Tok), for audience curiosity, a large number of short video bloggers create "cross-dressing" characters to attract attention. Such as some male bloggers magnify women's behaviors through cross-dressing. Recently, women try to beat back by dressing as men and expressing the situation of women being "offended" by men in social production.

For classifying on history, experience and causes of gender misplacement in literature, theaters and films, we can see that

there are roughly three kinds of changes: cross-dressing, gender exchange between men and women, and behavior like opposite gender. In ancient, its initial meaning is only because of historical or social factors, and then directors through this form of expression for fun or freshness which gives the audience a opportunity to look at the problem from the perspective of the opposite gender. Nowadays, with the gender misunderstanding to the role in the modern films, theaters, especially comedic films, the significance of gender misplacement role is more to satisfy the audience's curiosity, ugliness. The increasing "laugh material" is more likely to promote the gender stereotype for public, and even easily cause gender opposition.

3. The Meaning of Gender Misplacement in Happy Funage Movies

There are not many gender misplacement characters in Mahua Funage films. This paper selects the transgender--Meng Tejiao in Goodbye Mr. Loser, the gender exchange male and female roles in Never Say Die, and "cross-dressing" role in Hello, Mrs. Money as three different types of characters for analysis and deconstruction.

Table 2. A gender-misplaced characters in Mahua Funage films

Characters	Movie title	Release date	Box office	Genre	Actors
Meng Tejiao	Goodbye Mr. Loser	2015/09/30 September 30	¥1.441 billion (November 30, 2015)	Transgender	Chang Yuan
Ma Xiao Addison	Never Say Die	2017/09/30	¥2.2 billion (November 19, 2017)	gender exchange	Ma Li Al Lun
Huang Cang Hai	Hello, Mrs. Money	2018/09/30	¥600 million (November 11, 2018)	cross-dressing	Huang Cailun

Meng Tejiao--a transgender character in Goodbye Mr. Loser, who was a male in high school and really keen on cosmetics and skirts, also acted in a feminine behavior, finally, he changing the gender to female in adulthood. Although the plot in the whole film is not much, it still left a deep impression on the audience. In the analysis of this character, it is undeniable that the character shows a certain gender

diversity, but this character's appearance are more to support the protagonist, and there is no actual need to promote the development of the film. From the perspective of comedic films, the setting of the role is more for fun. It has a strong sense of "ugliness".

"Never Say Die" is about men and women soul exchange. After exchanging, the heroine Ma Xiao plays the role of a

fierce, masculinize female. The hero Addison is a male figure with female behavior. The setting of "male and female exchange" is the original intention to resolve the contradictions, so that the two characters can understand each other, and the elements of "gender exchange" mainly moves the plot forward rather than taking exaggerated behavior to have fun, this setting increases the interest of the film.

In "Hello, Mrs. Money", the role of "gender cross-dressing" is Huang Canghai, the male protagonist, who disguises himself as a rich aunt in order to help his leader cheat his marriage. The characters through behavior, clothing and voice for "cross-dressing". The film takes this as a selling point, designs and creates a large number of jokes based on gender differences. This setting only plays the meaning of "fun" and "ugliness".

4. The Value and Significance of Adopting Gender-misplaced Roles in Movies

4.1. Value in the Film

(1) Diversity of characters. The "gender misplacement" characters or "cross-dressing" performance in the film presents the diversity of the comedic film's characters. For instance, Xu Xian in the *The Legend of White Snake* embodies the image of a "Shusheng" (scholar in ancient China) figure through "women disguised as men," challenging traditional gender stereotypes that man with masculinity and women with femininity. Furthermore, integrating elements of "gender misplacement" into the narrative introduces novel and distinctive viewing experiences for audiences.

(2) The element of ugliness. Comedy films often incorporate elements associated with ugliness to create laughter and leave lasting impressions on audiences. Characters such as Ruhua in "Hail the Judge" and "Shiliu" in "Flirting Scholar" exemplify that unattractive characters can generate humor especially when they make a fool.

(3) Exploration of gender. In the "gender misplacement" movies, especially the films which is about men and women on the wrong body, whether it is father and daughter/husband and wife/friends, provides a sample of exploration and communication between the opposite gender by feeling each other's behavior in the most simple way--gender transformation. Taking the movie as the sample to resolve contradictions and misunderstanding between different gender in social reality.

4.2. Social Values

Gender identity. "Gender misplacement" movies are often the best portrayal of gender issues in social reality. Those films challenge social stereotypes and breaks down the boundaries of gender, making the audience realize that gender is not fixed, but can be diverse and fluid. More than any other films genres, "Gender misplacement" movies reflect gender possibility, also give their characters another gender identity in their work.[17]

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the setting of "gender misplacement" characters in domestic comedy films indeed has certain social values. Some scholars believe that the emergence of "gender misplacement" can bring good discussions to LGBTQ in

society, also influence the public to know more about gender, this is the positive effect. At the same time, the appearance of "gender misplacement" also reflects the inclusiveness from society. Scholar Gong Lanlan believes that the audience's preference of "gender misplacement" reflects that the standards of traditional gender are not as strict as the expression of main values, which indirectly proves that gender identity established through behavioral rehearsal.[18]

However, current domestic comedy film market is excessively consuming the "gender misplacement" and it does not deeply present or discuss the gender behavior, gender identity concept, only through some exaggerated gender behaviors to create jokes, such situations not only let audiences misunderstand about gender diversity, but also aggravate the social stereotype between male and female. Also, the performance of transgenders' character in comedic films shows offensive expressions, most of comedic films like to use of "sissy, tomboy".

At present, with the influence and development of feminism in the domestic film market, the design and expression of female in the film should be more carefully considered, not only use "gender misplacement" as fun, and with audience's growing aesthetic, Mahua Funage and other comedy film producers also need to reconsider how to break the deadlock and make more meaningful comedic films.

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