

# A Comparison of East Asian Women's Survival Status in Cinematography: Take Tōkyō Joshi Zukan and Beijing Women's Illustration as Examples

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**Abstract.** Film and television literature reflects social reality and the direction of cultural thinking. In recent years, film and television works about the current situation of women in East Asia have attracted a great response in the market. Two typical examples are "Tōkyō Joshi Zukan" and the Chinese adaptation of "Beijing Women's Illustration", which portray in detail the workplace life, family background and personal growth experiences of contemporary women in these two East Asian countries, Japan and China, respectively. Tōkyō Joshi Zukan is a Japanese web series that started in 2016, was directed by Tabata, starred by Asami Mizukawa, and premiered on Amazon on December 16, 2016. Based on a four-panel manga of the same name, the series follows the twenty years of the life of Aya Saito, a girl from Akita Prefecture who has longed for the big city since childhood and comes to Tokyo after graduating from a local university. Beijing Women's Illustration is a drama co-produced by Xiong Kids Media and Youku, directed by Li Zhi, written by Zhang Jia and starred by Qi Wei, Chen Jin and Wu Yue, which premiered on Youku on April 10, 2018. Adapted from the novel of the same name, the drama is about the real-life relationships and lives of solo women represented by Chen Koyi, a northern drifting girl who experienced ten years in Beijing. This paper selects these two TV series for comparative study to explore the current situation of contemporary women's lives in East Asia.

**Keywords:** East Asian Women, Survival Status, Cinematography, Tōkyō Joshi Zukan, Beijing Women's Illustration.

## 1. Introduction

The survival situation of women in East Asia has been the hottest topic in recent years. With the rise of the "Metoo" movement and the awakening of feminist consciousness, more and more women are aware of the social environment they are in. This kind of encounter and experience often only resonates among women. Radical feminists embrace non-marriage and look down on those who long for marriage, while on the other hand, some people completely ignore the injustices women face and even categorize an affirmative action movement as foreign infiltration. All these are repeatedly trampling on women who are already in a vulnerable position.

For the awakening of feminist consciousness and the perception of women, a number of superficial books and films have emerged, one after another. Books such as "Feminism from Scratch" present the thoughts of Chizuko Ueno and Nagako Tanaburo on the role of women in a dialogue format, discussing the plight and struggles of women, the conflicts with men, the conflicts with mothers who are also women, and the system behind them, and other topics based on life to explore the oppression of women hidden behind these phenomena. Unlike "Feminism from Scratch," which is a dialogue with mature women, "Kim Ji-young, born in 1982," presents these phenomena and experiences, the stories that are happening to and around women all the time, in a very realistic way [1]. The long-standing struggles and uncertainties of women's hearts, and the shackles they carry, are brought out in the best possible way. Moreover, for women in East Asia, this resonance crosses national boundaries and can be felt by anyone [2]. In East Asia, especially in China, there are too few realistic films that focus on women's issues, especially young and middle-aged women. "Urban female reflection dramas show the career, emotional and spiritual growth of young women in the metropolis [3]." Therefore, this essay is going to compare and analyze such web series as "Tōkyō Joshi Zukan" and "Beijing Women's Illustration", which are still young in terms of text but have more effective

social significance, in the hope that people can draw strength from these works, feel the plight of women more truly, and start over to explore the "identity" of contemporary urban female desire subjects, their identification with the "other", their establishment of "self" in the contradiction between tradition and reality, and the differences between different regional cultures metaphorically represented by the symbolization of female images from two series, and eventually understand the current situation of women's existence in East Asia.

## **2. Overview of film and television representation of urban women's living conditions in China and Japan**

The history of Chinese film and television dramas has portrayed numerous female characters with different images and shown the characteristics of the times at different stages of China's historical development, which can be briefly summarized into three stages. From the reform and opening up to around the new century, the image of women on the screen at this stage showed an incomplete initiative, and this incompleteness was manifested by both the expression of rebellious consciousness and an obvious tendency to cater to the audience's visual. The second stage is the first decade of the new century. In this stage, with the change of the viewing group, women were re-integrated into the family image sequence, and the image of women was still the backing of the traditional male-centered ideology. In the third stage, from 2010 to the present, the image of women on the screen has become more diversified, including the image of female protagonists and urban women who are bound by old family and social ties, as well as female characters who have broken away from the simple love scenarios of the original adolescence and stepped out of the family ethical ties [4].

In the first stage, the portrayal of female characters in films and dramas was rather flat and dry until the rise of the fifth generation of directors broke this situation and created a number of rural female characters with distinct personalities. The female character Cui Qiao in Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984), which had awakened the idea of the female self and which won the Silver Leopard Award at the 38th Locarno International Film Festival in Switzerland in 1985. The rebelliousness of women in the narrative structure was even stronger in Zhang Yimou's *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992), which won the Golden Lion Award at the 49th Venice Film Festival. In the second stage, the modernization of ideas enabled directors to focus more boldly on female themes, but the films and dramas in this stage were mostly confined to the "family" field, and a large number of family ethics dramas appeared, which focused on the marital relationship and ethical and emotional issues between men and women, and films such as Ning Ying's *Perpetual Motion* (2005), in which women are in a dominated position in the family and return to the family at the end. Subsequently, along with the refinement of the social division of labor, women have more room for growth than before, and films and dramas with large female protagonists have become a craze. A number of films and dramas focusing on the survival status of contemporary women have emerged, focusing on the survival status and personal growth of urban women and shaping a number of contemporary urban working women characters with a sense of independence.

Compared to China, the development of Japanese TV series started earlier, and the portrayal of female characters is relatively diverse.

Japanese TV dramas were born in 1940, and in the 60 years before 2000, the development of female consciousness in dramas went through three stages. They are "the budding period of female consciousness (1940-1959), the development period in which female concern coexisted with stereotypical images (1960 ~ 1989), and the 'golden decade' in which independent consciousness coexisted with the fate of the object (1990-1999)" [5]. In the nascent period, films and dramas about women's survival were aimed at diverting the public's attention from the political and economic problems of post-war Japan, and the resulting films and dramas did not really reflect the state of women's survival at that time, among which the typical work was Kenji Gouguchi's "Saikaku ichidai onna" (1952), about a unique Japanese geisha, which also won the 17th International Prize at the Venice Film Festival. During the development period, female characters frequently appeared in large

numbers and began to focus on women's survival in a practical way. The third stage, *Tokyo Love Story* (1991), portrayed the heroine Rika, who became an instant hit in Asia.

Although Japanese TV dramas have experienced several years of a downturn since the turn of the century, the works that have emerged from 2004 to the present show the state of women's existence and are very much a reflection of women's existence today. In *Memories of Matsuko* (2006), Matsuko's difficult life reflects the author's thoughts on women today and the drift in their own existence; in *Tōkyō Joshi Zukan* (2016), the realistic portrayal of a single woman living in Tokyo is told through Aya's perspective.

Due to the similarity in time and setting, the experiences and psychological states of the two female protagonists are somewhat similar. This paper selects two works, *Tōkyō Joshi Zukan* and *Beijing Women's Illustration*, for comparison to explore the similarities and differences in the portrayal of contemporary urban women in the film and television works of the two East Asian countries.

### 3. Analysis of the differences in plots and their expressiveness

#### 3.1 Gender Neglect in Intimate Relationships

In both plays, the female protagonists are portrayed in their larger and smaller environments, with the larger environment being the social environment and the smaller environment being the intimate relationships in which the female protagonists find themselves.

Saito Aya in "*Tōkyō Joshi Zukan*" is subject to fewer intimate relationships than Chen Koyi in "*Beijing Women's Illustration*".

Aya Saito's original family can be described as relatively smooth and happy, and she is only puzzled by the fact that her mother left Tokyo for love and married in a small town in the countryside. It is only after Aya graduates from Akita University and heads to the Tokyo of her dreams that her network of intimate relationships - and her many boyfriends - is officially woven.

Aya's first Tokyo boyfriend, Naoki, is average in every way, but his feelings for Aya are more genuine. The two live a relatively ordinary and quiet life together, but Aya's desires and pursuits do not allow for such mediocrity, and she resolutely chooses to separate. In this relationship, Aya actually did not suffer from mental violence but only, in the end, will look back with nostalgia. The second boyfriend is a rich boy, Takayuki, who satisfies Aya's vanity and desires to some extent. However, after he claims to be non-marital and turns his head to marry a rich woman from Tokyo, Aya's mind changes a bit. This inevitably contributes to the growth of Aya's ambition and the misalignment of her self-positioning. The third boyfriend, Yukikazu, is the most important person in Aya's life. Aya experiences a luxurious life with him and becomes addicted to it, and starts to fantasize about marriage, trying to force Yukikazu to divorce through a breakup to achieve her goal. Unfortunately for Aya, she fails miserably. After the failure of this relationship, Aya goes from being an "independent" woman who only strives to move up the ladder to give in to marriage. Aya then goes through a messy marriage and a cynical blind date, suffering from her ex-husband's position on women as "child-bearing" and "housewives" and the blind date's disdain for her origins. Aya's last boyfriend, Sho Kohei, cheats on his best friend Reiko in front of money, which makes Aya feel confused and frustrated, and she realizes that no matter how hard she works, she is no match for her background.

Chen Koyi's network of intimate relationships is more focused on the workplace. The comprehensive urban life group portrait is a real textbook of the workplace. In "*Beijing Women's Illustration*", except for the female protagonist Chen Koyi, all the other characters have more typical labeling characteristics: female colleagues who are willing to sacrifice themselves for promotion, male leaders who are superficially kind but sexually harass female subordinates, female leaders who have a strong background but only focus on personnel and ignore their work, rich youngsters who play with their feelings irresponsibly... Living in the huge urban has made more connections between people, but fewer and fewer intimate relationships with close ties. "*Beijing Women's Illustration*" creates a detailed and comprehensive portrait of urban life. The female protagonists' resourceful ways

of resolving the problems provide a model for newcomers to the workplace to learn from. The audience resonates with the characters in the drama and unconsciously compares the female protagonists' growth trajectory with their personal experiences, which adds to the sense of immersion in the drama.

Integrating the two female protagonists, the harm caused by the intimate relationships they suffered is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Comparison of harm caused by the intimacy of 2 female protagonists

Character \ Comparison	Intimate Relationships	Harm Caused by Intimacy			
		Direct Injury	Unconscious Injury	From the Same Sex	From the Opposite Sex
Saito Aya	lovers, husband, friend	lovers, husband	husband, friend	√	√
Chen Koyi	lovers, husband	lovers, husband	husband	×	√

### 3.2 Gender discrimination in the social environment

"Due to their special living and development environment, urban women are the first to be exposed to new social dynamics among all women, and this special situation has caused them many problems in acquiring dignity and identity under the prevalence of urban and consumer culture [6]."

The social environment of both plays focuses on the workplace of the female protagonists, and they both suffer from gender discrimination in the workplace coincidentally. As Lu Xun points out in "What Happens After Nala Leaves", "It is not true that a woman is an independent woman when she has gained economic independence and freedom. In terms of economic freedom, is she not a puppet anymore? Still a puppet. It is just that the number of things that one is held by can be reduced, and the number of puppets one are able to hold can be increased [7]." Both heroines have jobs, but in the workplace, they encounter different degrees of gender discrimination.

Aya Saito is doing relatively well in her career field, thanks to the fact that she works in a fashion-related job, which is considered a women's only workplace. Her boss is also a feminist. However, women in the workplace as lucky as Aya are still in the minority. "Companies in Japan are often reluctant to recruit highly educated female employees, or professional women in Japanese companies do not have much room for advancement [8]." Although Aya has made good progress at work thanks to her biting and desperate efforts, she is still among the laggards compared to men in her age group. Aya has one more social environment in the play than Chen Koyi - matchmaking, embodied in the play, "the future marriage partner can only be 'women in the port area'" "When men look for a marriage partner, they will give priority to pregnancy and fertility (age), while appearance and annual income, etc. come second [8]." The Japanese "hierarchy" and the narrowing of the value of women can be felt.

On the other hand, after the broadcast of "Beijing Women's Illustrated", it can be found from the episode description that throughout the whole series, Chen Koyi is surrounded by eleven men who have a crush on her one after another: a boyfriend in a small town, a boyfriend she meets in a new company, a male colleague who sexually harasses her, a boss who pays for her at the first meeting and takes her to dinner parties with older men and so on. Furthermore, her various job opportunities were brought to her by these men. Her first job was offered by an old classmate who sexually harassed her. Her second job was obtained at a greasy dinner party, and after experiencing sexual harassment from her boss at her second job, she jumped to her third job, met a rich client and finally turned into the girlfriend of the rich man. Chen Koyi actually gets her career advancement by surrounding herself with different men. On the contrary, in "Tōkyō Joshi Zukan", although the heroine also experienced

many different men, her own career and struggle and her relationship with men are two different trajectories.

Why is the Chinese version of the white-collar female inseparable from men? Objectively speaking, in the reality of China's situation, there is a realistic basis for a woman's career development to rely on the willingness of men to help and get started. In a society where most of the social resources are in the hands of men, women have to trade with men in different ways to succeed in exchange for resources, such as Yao Mei, who has to become a mistress, and Mrs. Gu, who has made a huge fortune through a divorce and laid the foundation for her business. Therefore, the plot of the TV series is only a true reflection of real life, but these episodes reflect only a very small part of real life. In reality, most women who are on their own basically use the virtue of their professional ability and hard work to achieve success and status. Women who work well in a certain field are irreplaceable, and men who work with such women are far more interested in their professional abilities than in their beauty.

### **3.3 The ending of the plot and the female protagonists' way of reconciliation to the status of existence implies**

Saito Aya's endless desire and greed are the original sin of her unhappiness. In the end, Aya buys a resold apartment and lives with her male best friend. After meeting a woman in red one day, Aya says to herself in her heart, "Women who do not know how to be satisfied and are greedy can only be considered true urban women if they also savor this jealousy as a spice of life. Let's cheer together, one after another because there is so much more to want." The director sets up an open ending, but the overall ending seems to be a good one. After pursuing a brief period of stability, Aya reconciles with her confused and wandering self and chooses to continue to be greedy and continue to climb the ladder.

Chen Koyi returned to Beijing to sell her house. She gathered her friends, former colleagues and former company subordinates to start a business together. Although the deposit is gone and the property is gone, she feels more fulfilled than ever. In 2018, Dr. Xu came to Beijing for a meeting, and he took out his savings to rent an office for Chen Koyi, who was very moved. Xiaoyun came to Beijing for a trip, and she no longer urged Chen Koyi to get married and have children because she understood that everyone's life could not be replicated.

In terms of plotting, both works lean toward steering the plot for a happy ending, with Beauvoir noting in *The Second Sex* that "it is easier to keep people in bondage than to free them from that bondage, so long as that bondage will bring benefit." The open ending is due to the contradictory nature of the heroines themselves, who are confused but have become so used to moving forward in such a greedy way that they naturally have to go forward without looking back. Like putting on Andersen's red dancing shoes, there is no doubt that Aya and Chen will move on.

## **4. Market feedback of the two works in their home countries**

Regarding the value of women, the fact is that both China and Japan have always had an in-and-out view.

The Japanese term "Minato" refers to the people who live in the Minato district of Tokyo. Roppongi Hills, Tokyo Tower, and other areas in Minato are gathering places for the rich and the famous, the elegant and the luxurious. The people who live here are the ones who have money, power and good taste.

Putting aside the TV series, there is a look at the real "Minato" men and women using the results of the 2017 MIF (MarketIntelligence & Forecast) survey of 30,000 people in Table.2.

**Table 2.** Characteristics of women living in Minato, Tokyo (Data from the Mitsubishi Research Institute's Market Intelligence & Forecast (MIF) Lifestyle Forecast System 2017 survey)

	Minato Female Resident ①	National Average ②	①— ②
University graduation	52.6%	30.3%	22.3%
Personal annual income of 6 million to 7 million	7.9%	0.9%	7.0%
Personal annual income of 100 million or more	2.6%	0.0%	2.6%
Want to be in charge and guide others	18.4%	10.3%	8.1%
Want to become a "winning team" in life	50.0%	40.9%	9.1%
Want to enjoy life	73.7%	88.8%	- 15.1%
Do not engage in "marriage work"	73.3%	46.8%	26.5%
Want to hold a wedding overseas in the future	46.7%	12.7%	34.0%
Men should behave like men, and women should behave like women.	20.0%	35.5%	- 15.5%

Women living in Minato are highly educated and high-income compared to the national average. In this survey, all women with an annual income of 100 million are located in Minato. Half of the women in Minato want to be the winner in life. In this regard, they are not very comfortable enjoying life, and even 80% of them do not think that they should be very feminine in their behavior. Compared to the national average of nearly half, more than 70% of single women in Minato do not go to various sororities to get married. However, the percentage of those who wish to have their wedding overseas is nearly four times the national average.

It should be said that well-educated, well-paid, and responsible women in Minato are more "manly" than the average woman, but at the same time, the expectation of overseas weddings can be assumed that, in addition to high standards, they also have a little girl-like longing for marriage. Such data is very similar to the Aya (who also lived in the Minato area).

The resonance of "Tōkyō Joshi Zukan" can be said to be a reflection of the inequality between the rich and poor brought about by the progress of society in the country, as well as the one-sidedness of the value of women and the problem of objectification. It is believed that in the near future, people's values will be more diverse and will resonate with more cultures or have more ideas. However, it is the meaning of life itself that someone can have the life he wants without fear of hardship.

"Remakes of TV dramas are an important cultural phenomenon in the film and television art industry. In recent years, remakes of overseas classic IP dramas have become a popular trend [9]." Although "Beijing Women's Illustration" has made significant improvements in the adaptation of Japanese IP dramas, the episode's airtime and buzz are far from reaching the "breakout" level. The show's exposure to values is the most successful aspect, but it has also become a source of controversy, with the overwhelming intersection of the heroine's feelings and work in the plot and the unrealistic fiction of being promoted to boss in three years, inevitably leaving the audience with the impression that the heroine is using men to get ahead. With the successful foundation of the previous work, "Beijing Women's Illustration" is also difficult not to be compared with "Tōkyō Joshi Zukan". The new work may make the original fans disappointed. To some degree, it is not changed and lost the meaning of the remake, which forms a paradox, that is, how to make the discerning fans of the original version satisfied and have a compelling creative point as well. This is also always a problem for every remake.

Although the format of "illustration" is derived from the original Japanese drama, it has given a completely new approach to describe. Not only does the "illustration" add a certain artfulness to the plenty Chinese drama, but it also connects the narrative logic of the whole story in terms of content. The Beijing and the women in "illustration" show us the flowing of modernity and the convergence

of possibilities. In the interweaving and symbiosis, both the woman and the city grow up with each other [10].

The "Internet +" era is undergoing a new round of consumer upgrading; the market is more segmented and personalized. According to the "2017 China Women's Consumption Survey Report", data shows that China currently has 678 million women in the population. Among them, three-quarters of women control the family property, which makes more and more economically and personality independent women undoubtedly become the largest piece of cake in the consumer market. In order to master this kind of market, it is also needed content providers to give more thought, attention and respect.

The values conveyed in "Tōkyō Joshi Zukan" actually represent only a small part of Japan. More and more young Japanese people are becoming more and more ordinary and pragmatic. Such a tendency is perhaps related to the Japanese society that has not experienced economic prosperity and has been faced with fewer children since birth, advanced age, and 20 years of economic dislocation. In China, it is a social environment that believes that every day is new and that every day is better than the previous one.

## 5. Conclusions

The two plays build the image and plot of the protagonists based on the current situation of women's existence in real life and show the current situation of women's existence in East Asian countries, respectively, which shows that with the rise of the feminist movement in recent years, the status of women in the workplace has improved accordingly. However, they still carry the pressure of patriarchy from their original families. The status of women reflects the civilization of a country to a certain extent, and the cultural environment of women in both East Asian countries is very similar, so the social pressure on them is also very similar. The directors and scriptwriters create their scripts while betting on their deep concern and sympathy for the female population. In social and family life, women play multiple roles and have different identities, but they themselves are often unable to break out of the identity trap, unable to find a precise subject position in the world's stereotypes and individual confinement, unable to express their true demands, and unable to live their own individual values. While thinking about the large amount of resonance that such works evoke, we should pay more attention to the fate of women in their own real life, which is perhaps the original purpose of the creation of such film and television works.

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