

The Development and Changes of Female Role Construction in Chinese Female Films

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Abstract. In today's seemingly equal Chinese society, women are always discriminated against by society. In the old feudal society under the rule of male power in China, women could only survive in society if they were completely attached to men, which made Chinese women oppressed by the male power society for a long time, and they lost their freedom and choice in life. However, with the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the country began to advocate gender equality, and women could also actively participate in social work. However, China's feudal ideology has lasted for thousands of years, while the founding of New China is less than 100 years old, so it is difficult for feudal ideology to be effectively changed in a short time. Until today, society still discriminates against women. With the continuous development of Chinese society and the continuous improvement of policies, more and more Chinese women have received higher education. They are eager to be recognized by society and realize their own value. This paper mainly analyzes and summarizes the status of female characters in Chinese female films in different periods. Compared with the development of the times, the changes and progress of women's roles in Chinese female films criticize and expose the gender inequality in new China.

Keywords: Feminist Thought; Chinese Female Films; Sexism.

1. Introduction

In today's Chinese society, feminist thought and the change in women's status have been very hot topics. In traditional Chinese thought, the main responsibility of women is to focus on the family and children. With the coming of the 21st century, great changes have taken place in the position and responsibility of women. However, ideas have been with us for thousands of years, and it is difficult to change them effectively in a short time. Tan believes that the traditional marriage mode is that women provide reproductive value and men provide economic value, but with the progress of society, society encourages women to participate in social work and realize their own value [1]. This encourages women to take part in social work while giving birth and taking care of their families, which makes women's spirit and psychology bear greater pressure. So in today's Chinese society, women are given more responsibilities and obligations.

There are many classic female characters in Chinese female films of different periods, which describe different identities and statuses. Because, most of these female characters reflected the real life of Chinese women in society at that time. The shooting background of early Chinese female films is mainly family. Nevertheless, due to the restriction and oppression of women's abilities and thoughts in the old society, most women could only become accessories to men. This phenomenon caused misery and helplessness in most women's lives and marriages and reflected the tragic fate of women at that time. With the improvement of Chinese women's status in the later period, many Chinese female films reflect the selfishness and greed of men in marriage, thus reflecting women's self-reliance and strength. In recent years, the shooting background of many Chinese female films has changed, from family to the workplace, which represents a new promotion of women's status. The plot of the film mainly tells about women's experiences in the workplace.

This paper deeply analyzes the status of female roles in Chinese female films at different stages so as to criticize social discrimination against women and call for equality between men and women.

2. The different stages of development of female film characters

The development of Chinese female film roles can be divided into three periods. The first period is from the 1980s to the 1990s. The main features are how women contribute to their families, how they focus on family, marriage, and childbirth, and the tragic fate of women in the old society. The second period is from the early 21st century to around 2010. Its main feature is that most women gradually form self-cognition and have the ability to get rid of men. Women are eager to realize their own value through work, dare to control their own destiny, and dare to criticize men's selfishness and greed in marriage and family. The third period, from 2010 to now, is mainly characterized by the change of shooting background, from family to workplace, which also means that women's cognition and thinking have been improved again. Show the status quo of women in the workplace from the perspective of professional women in films.

Many early Chinese female films take family and marriage as the main elements, which reflect how women pay for their families and how they long for marriage. However, in this era, when women lack cultural knowledge and independent thinking ability, the vast majority of women will become the accessories of men, and most of their lives will end in tragedy. For example, the film "Red Lantern Hanging High" is a love story film directed by Zhang Yimou. It was released in Italy on September 10, 1991, and in mainland China on December 20, 1991. Wu thinks that this film deeply understands the tragic fate of women in the old society, which is the enrichment of women's living conditions under the feudal rule for thousands of years [2]. This film is adapted from Su Tong's novel *Wives and Concubines*, which tells the story of several concubines of a large family who were jealous of each other during the Republic of China, thus causing a series of tragedies. Song Lian (played by Gong Li), the heroine in the film, was originally an educated student, but she had no choice but to marry a rich landlord because of a family accident and began her tragic life from then on. In order to live a good life, she was forced to compete with a concubine in the landlord's family in order to gain more love. Nevertheless, due to the old and pedantic ideas of society and the secular oppression, Song Lian was driven crazy. She believes that this film tells the real life of the feudal society under the rule of Chinese patriarchal ideology, and it also reflects the sorrow of women's oppression [3].

In the later period, in order to promote women's status, many Chinese female films belittle men in their film plots, focusing on a man's selfishness, greed, and irresponsibility in marriage, so as to reflect women's strength and independence. Jin pointed out that under the influence of western films, Chinese female films have been greatly changed [4]. The plot of the film tries to expose male hegemony and gender differences in the films, reshape women's consciousness and construct women's subjective status. Huang thinks that the female characters in Chinese female films deeply reflect feminist thoughts and women's mental journey, which also reflects the progress of Chinese women [5]. For example, the film "Beautiful Mother" is directed by director Sun Zhou. This film tells the story of Sun Liying's divorce from her husband a few years ago, who alone raised his son Zheng Da, who was born deaf and patiently taught his son to speak and read. Wang suggested that this film shows a mother's love for her children to the fullest in adversity [6]. As the son of Sun Liying (played by Gong Li), a female worker, suffers from congenital deafness, her husband is unwilling to continue raising a defective child, so he chooses to escape. Thus, Sun Liying divorces her husband and raises his son alone. In order to take better care of her son's life, she quit a very good job and found a newspaper delivery job so that she could accompany her son every day. In this way, she worked hard for her son's life that ordinary people could not understand. Later, Fang Zipin (played by Shi Jingming), a primary school teacher, came into her life, just like a ray of sunshine illuminating her life. However, in order to take better care of her son, she refused this relationship. In her mind, as a mother, her son is her most important person. To a great extent, this film shows a woman's independence and strength, but it also belittles men in the plot. It shows that with the development of society, women's status and thoughts have improved, and they are unwilling to give in to men blindly, and they can achieve their inner goals through their own abilities.

In recent years, with the improvement of women's status, the shooting background of many female films has shifted from family to the workplace, which also represents the progress of women's

thoughts. He pointed out that as more and more women receive higher education, women's thinking has changed and improved [7]. Xu thinks that the female characters in the early Chinese female films are mainly gentle and virtuous wives and mothers, and there are many professional women in the recent Chinese female films, which means that the status of female characters is gradually improved, and feminist thoughts are progressing [8]. For example, the film "Du Lala's Promotion", a love film jointly directed by Xu Jinglei and Hanjin An and starring Xu Jinglei, Karen Mok, and Huang Lixing, was released on the Chinese mainland on April 15, 2010. Du Lala, the heroine in the film, hopes to find a very satisfactory job so that she can stand on the ground in society, but this is a very difficult and long process. She encountered many difficulties and suffered many grievances, but in the end, she gained her career and love. Zhang thinks that the whole film plot seems smooth, but there is actually much unknown sadness behind it [9]. Du Lala encountered much discrimination when she first sought a job. Some of them were questioned by male employees and male leaders about their ability to work, and some of them were urged to marry and get pregnant by people around them. Therefore, this film reflects that the seemingly equal society between men and women is actually influenced by traditional thinking, and people always discriminate against women.

The film "My Sister" is directed by female director Yin Ruoxin and written by You Xiaoying. It was released in mainland China on April 2, 2021. Chi pointed out that this film reflects the progress and independence of Chinese women's thoughts in the new era [10]. After the heroine's parents died in a car accident, all the relatives in the family thought that her brother was the only boy in the family and the center of the family, so the heroine should take care of her brother. Nevertheless, this was rejected by the heroine, who thought that raising her brother would make her lose the chance to live the most. Nonetheless, this idea was not understood by relatives at home, and they thought it was selfish and irresponsible. The heroine has her own ideas and pursuits. She is eager to break the old pedantic ideas and dare to pursue her own life. Song, J, Liu, S pointed out that this film shows that women in the new society dare to express their ideas and break through the old traditional ideas, which also represents women's progress [11].

3. Reflection and suggestions

This study found that the differences in the perception of gender inequality in Chinese society were related to gender, age, socioeconomic status, and intra-household equality and that people's perceptions of gender inequality may be constructed in different contexts, such as public issues, family life, and historical comparisons. In addition, the factors associated with perceived differences in gender inequality identified in the exploratory analysis involve and play different parts in perceived gender inequality in different contexts.

Both from the practical experience of Chinese women's emancipation and from the history of the feminist movement in the West, society's perception of gender equality has not changed day by day; on the contrary, hesitations, and repetitions in the perception of gender equality present themselves in various forms from time to time. One of the phenomena that draw our attention is the resurgence of traditional gender ideologies. Some recent studies have analyzed the resurgence of traditional gender ideologies in China from different perspectives. In the old society, the romance film "The Big Red Lantern Hanging High", directed by Zhang Yimou, written by Su Tong and Ni Zhen, and starring Gong Li, Ma Jingwu, and He Cai Feng, as described above, is one such film. It was released in Italy on September 10, 1991, and in mainland China on December 20, 1991. The film understands the tragic fate of women in the old society and richly reflects the living conditions of women under the feudal rule for thousands of years. In Chinese film culture, due to the influence of traditional culture, the corrupt concepts of "men are superior to women" and "three wives and four concubines" are often expressed in films. In movies, men are often portrayed as leaders whose authority cannot be questioned by women, while women are repressed by male authority and often show various degrees of "nudity" on the screen to satisfy men's "voyeurism" and "voyeurism". Although feminism is on the rise, the deep-rooted patriarchy is still a persistent problem in Chinese film culture that cannot be

eradicated. Until now, women are sometimes subjected to tragic notions of discrimination and unequal treatment. Isn't this different from the old society, except that it is now replaced by discrimination in the heart and in words, so are men and women still equal now?

In fact, raising gender awareness is an important goal in advancing the practice of gender equality, and its significance lies in raising awareness of gender inequality and the increased barriers women face in participating equally in and deriving equal benefits from the political and economic life of society. It can be said that recognizing the existence of gender inequality is one of the prerequisites for the pursuit of gender equality. However, due to the diversity and complexity of the gender system and the different experiences of different groups, people may not agree on the existence of gender inequality.

However, this public disapproval cannot be because of this public disapproval, because of the deep-rooted discrimination in China and because of the many obstacles that keep women in a permanent inferior position. To change this situation requires a great awakening of women's consciousness and everyone's consciousness. From the lack of female consciousness to the awakening of female consciousness, and then to the liberation of women themselves is a process from self-awakening to self-consciousness, which is the process of the continuous development of the feminist movement.

The criticism of women's self-liberation consciousness also has different levels; first of all, women first have the consciousness of self-liberation. For example, Huang Shan analyzes the consciousness of women's liberation embodied in the film by director Ann Hui in "Interpreting the Feminism of Fried Rice", i.e., the constructed female anti-essentialist gender temperament, feminist sexual politics and cool child politics, and these three aspects are discussed in the film. The first is the emancipatory consciousness of women. Secondly, the way of women's self-redemption is discussed. Wang Jiyuan's "Dilemma and Deliverance: A Feminist Perspective on Man-Ghost-Emotion" analyzes the struggle of the heroine Qiu Yun in the face of her predicament and her performance as a male to fight against her predicament. Yao Liyuan's "Women are not bad" from a feminist perspective analyzes that the reason why women are not bad is that the heroine finds her own value and completes the liberation of her personality, in which women's badness is a way of self-help and liberation. In "The Piano" in Feminist Perspective: An Analysis of Female Consciousness in the Film "Piano Lesson", Guan Zheng also elaborates on the female protagonist's conscious rebellion, in which the female protagonist's exuberant piano sound is an outlet for her dissatisfaction with what has happened to her. The final renunciation of the piano symbolizes the growth of women's independence and their complete freedom from men. In Liu Yuxiao's "Self-Redemption under Pride and Prejudice: A Feminist Interpretation of Cherished Life", the three stages of the heroine's self-redemption are elaborated - from the desire for others to save her, to self-redemption, and finally to the completion of redemption. Finally, the reasons for the success of women's self-redemption are analyzed. In Sun Zhili's "Feminism from the Perspective of the Silence of the Gay Goats", the discussion on the female awakening and self-redemption of the heroine Clarice illustrates that the main reason for the success of Clarice's self-redemption is her sensitive, delicate and compassionate femininity. The common reason for the formation of women's self-redemption and self-liberation consciousness is that women themselves are in a difficult existential dilemma, either to perish or to redeem themselves, and women's choice of self-redemption is a positive attitude that deserves recognition.

Feminist film criticism has gradually come to the rational realization that women need to understand and deal with the relationship between the two sexes and have a correct sense of gender in order to be truly free from the initial struggle for women's independence and rights. Li Dong's analysis concludes that "gender studies in cultural criticism is concerned with the historical tracing of the unequal relationship between the sexes, the respect for the equal social and cultural rights of the sexes, the practical protection of the social and cultural rights of the sexes, the confrontation of gender differences and the promotion of the pluralistic development of the two types of social roles." This means that gender-conscious criticism should focus on the relationship between the two genders in social life. In the past four to five years, the research on gender consciousness in Chinese feminist

film criticism has been summarized into four main areas: research discussions on gender identity, the division between the sexes and the like, gender equality, and gender reconciliation.

Gender equality is the highest level pursued by the feminist movement, and the discussion of gender equality and harmony in Chinese feminist film criticism has also emerged, which is known as neo-feminism in critical articles. In Zhu Yan's "A Study of the Film "Dulala's Promotion" in the Perspective of New Feminism", through the analysis of the film "Dulala's Promotion", it is explained that the spirit of New Feminism directs feminism to peace, advocates the harmony of the two sexes, and emphasizes the equality of men and women. Through a comparison of gender expressions in novels and films, Zhu Juxiang points out that both genders should see each other from an equal perspective before engaging in communication and dialogue. She also proposes that "gender is a shared human identity that is always relevant to human life. It is a natural and biological distinction between the two genders, each with its own strengths and equal to the other". This means that the only way to be equal is to face the differences between the genders properly and respect them, ultimately achieving true gender equality.

4. Conclusion

In short, there are many classic female characters from different periods in Chinese female films, depicting very different statuses and identities, such as the tragic life of women in the old times and their low status. In recent years, however, many Chinese female films have changed their settings, from the family to the workplace, which represents a new elevation of women's status. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the status of female characters in Chinese women's films at different stages to critique and examine previous societal discrimination against women and call for gender equality. Feminism requires a concerted effort to abandon stereotypical sexist attitudes, oppose sexism in old cultures, dissolve machismo, and strive to transcend gender to achieve true gender equality with the ultimate goal of making the world a better place.

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