

The Feminist Characteristics of Chinese Films of the 1990s

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Abstract. In China, the 1990s was a time of profound sociopolitical, economic, and cultural transformation. Emerging particularly after Deng Xiaoping's 1992 speech establishing a socialist market economy, consumer culture as a new social and cultural trend steadily impacted the logic of artistic production. As an all-encompassing product of commodity, art, and ideology, the film depicts the transformation of the social and cultural environment from the standpoint of internal aesthetic awareness, interpretation, and text forms to exterior distribution and consumption. The emergence of consumer culture in the 1990s caused the dissolution of the meta-narrative of the 1980s, and the focus on grand themes such as collectivity, nationalism, class, and history has shifted to everyday life. Artistic creativity has sought convergence with the aesthetic sensibilities of the public while expressing subjective awareness. Against the cultural background of Chinese art production in the 1990s, this paper interprets the unique cultural characteristics of Chinese films of the period and investigates the expression of feminism in films, investigating the consumer turn, the emergence of popular culture, and the change in cultural discourse power in an effort to uncover new trends and developments in Chinese film.

Keywords: Chinese Film; The 1990s; Feminism; Female Image.

1. Introduction

With the development of the feminist movement, the growth of female films has changed accordingly. In the early 20th century, Chinese films were born amid domestic crises and foreign threats. The chaotic and special social background drove Chinese films to step on a developmental path different from that of foreign films. It is fair to say that Chinese female films are a late starter that develop slowly based on a weak theoretical foundation. In the 1990s, increasing studies on female films in China facilitated their growth to a certain extent. However, most of the relevant theoretical basis at that time drew lessons from the research results of western female films, so Chinese female films became eroded and utilized by ingrained feudal thoughts due to cultural differences between East and West, especially those in social systems. As a result, early Chinese films moved forward in confusion, making Chinese female films exist as a minor characters in Chinese film history. They never exerted a significant impact but were gradually assimilated by consumerism.

In the 21st century, Chinese films are faced with unprecedented opportunities for development. The spread of female consciousness in different historical and cultural contexts from the female perspective depends on various means of expression. Only Chinese female films accurately express the living condition and emotional state of contemporary Chinese women can they get rid of inherent prejudice, strive for their subjectivity, and become their own masters as a part of society.

The 1990s is a crucial era for Chinese film studies. The growth of consumer culture resulted in a quick takeover of speech by the masses, and the cultural values of the 1980s, with Enlightenment and modernity at their center, were eroded by the wave of commodity capitalism. The ideals of consumerism, which prioritize pleasurable experience, entertainment, and the present, were inexorably transferred onto the creative psyche of film creators.

China experienced a period of political, economic, and cultural upheaval in the 1990s, followed by reform and opening up as well as the diffusion of Western cultural ideology. The monetary cravings created by free market competition and market involvement in distribution converted Chinese culture from a politically ruled society to an economy-dominated one, and "consumption" emerged as a popular ideology.

Consumer culture objectively dilutes the focus of grand narratives on the public, group, and spiritual and moral levels, giving rise to individualized literary styles that center on personal desires, recollections of growth, and existential issues. The neo-realist and neo-historicist movements in literature in the 1990s and the growing customized forms in film production, such as documentary aesthetics, serve as an example of the invention of artworks in a form to fit the subject [1]. The awakening of artistic production in the 1990s in terms of subject awareness, aesthetic pursuit, and critical reflexivity led to the fusion of idealism and modernity sought by the market mechanism in the 1980s against the background of the transition to consumer culture.

2. Cultural Characteristics of Public Discourse in 1990s Films

Concurrent with the rise of the market economy in the 1990s, the quest for material goods surpassed the spiritual inquiry of aesthetics and literature. Production and consumption expanded from the elite class to the collective public, which directly led to the emergence of popular culture and changes in cultural discourse power [2]. The influence of the formation of public discourse on the cultural transition is most evident in two ways: in the prominence of individual awareness in folk discourse and the legitimization of the orgy of desire and bodily display.

2.1 Prominence of Individual Awareness in Folk Discourse

In an era dominated by consumer culture, the coexistence of subcultures, marginal cultures, and mass culture illustrates the democratic and inclusive nature of culture. National ideology is no longer the sole criterion for cinematic expression; market orientation, consumer demand, economic objectives, and the drive for self-expression have become the driving forces behind the production. While fourth- and fifth-generation directors in the 1980s are deemed to have boosted “humanitarianism” with the awareness of intellectual elites, Chinese films of the 1990s shed the burden of enlightenment and grand historical narratives, and fifth-generation directors rapidly diverged from the 1980s’ collective reflection on national history and culture to diversified viewpoints and narrative expressions. With the development of the fifth generation in the early 1990s, country and history went from a weighty object of meditation to a narrative backdrop of spectacle, whilst the production of the subsequent generations of directors turned to secular concerns and narratives of daily life. The films of the sixth-generation directors portray their personal experiences and private tales, exemplifying individuality’s opposition to collectivism.

Simultaneously, the styles of directors from the same generation began to diverge. The fifth and sixth generations of the 1990s pushed the value of the individual to the forefront, expressing concern for secular life and respect for individual values through the presentation of real-life experiences and the emotional confusion of common people, demonstrating an individualistic artistic pursuit that cannot be reduced to generational traits. The emergence of consumer culture in the 1990s swiftly undermined the national ideology’s collective discourse, and consumer awareness replaced enlightened consciousness, giving rise to new narrative values and aesthetic forms. However, despite the differences in narrative techniques and expressions, they all reflect a humanitarian concern for individual lives.

2.2 Legitimization of the Carnival of Desire and Bodily Display

Before the 1990s, Chinese films were subjected to the traditional Confucian ideological indoctrination and confinement expressed by “starting from love but restricted within the moral standards,” and physical desire and gender relations were deliberately obscured for a long historical period. Especially when it comes to revolutionary figures and proletarian heroes, the love relationship is taken away from the real affections, and sexual desire is presented as the scandalous and degenerate behavior of the negative characters. With the rise of consumer culture in the 1990s, narratives of material desire, sexual desire, and privacy were the first to be written and to acquire a legitimate identity. According to Daniel Bell, the distinctive feature of consumer culture “is that it satisfies not

needs but desires, which exceed physical instincts and enter the psychological level; it is thus infinite in its demands.” [3] Zhang Yimou’s *Ju Dou* is a film that renders the sexual tragedy between Ju Dou and Yang Tianqing as a life-giving impulse and catharsis against authoritarian power from the perspective of historical criticism. The foot-pounding scene in *Raise the Red Lantern* implicitly pervades sexual consciousness – the foot-pounding becomes a symbol of women’s sexual privilege and men’s desire to possess women. The hanging ritual of the red lanterns “has dissolved the simplicity and naturalness of sexual folk culture due to the artifice of the ritual and has become a totemic symbol of sensuality marked by Zhang Yimou, and with its strong visual impact, it evokes the sensual pleasure and stimulates the desire to observe.” In addition, films directed by fifth-generation directors, such as Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* and *Temptress Moon*, reveal human ugliness, gender inversion, and primitive desires that extend beyond individual psychology to the socio-historical level, collaging physical desires and individual liberation with the spatial display of feudal society, folklore spectacle, and Oedipus plot in the virtual historical space, making them into a narrative masterpiece with consumption value. The sixth-generation directors’ display of individual real desires is most typically presented in the “voyeuristic” mode, in which the director integrates the desires of the subject and the viewer between the “seeing” as the subject and the object “being seen” to project desires, expressing the reality of individual desires in the form of simple images. In Jiang Wen’s *in the Heat of the Sun*, Ma Xiaojun’s peeping into the bedroom of Milan, his fantasies about women’s bodies, and the hazy emergent sexual consciousness express the heartfelt youthful experiences of teenagers growing up. Similarly, Xia Qing’s peeping and secret love for Fu Shaoying, a girl in *The Making of Steel*, imply an Oedipal complex. In both films, women become the key characters who exude sexual charm and lead boys through the rite. He Jianjun’s *Postman* turns the venting of individual desire into the voyeurism of others’ letters and privacy. The sixth-generation directors related voyeurism to the expression of desire and explored the psychological dilemmas of the characters in realistic situations, thus achieving a realistic portrayal of their characters’ psychological dimension.

2.3 Simple Generalization of the Male Gaze

In the 1990s, the discourse power was mainly grasped by males in mainstream Chinese films, while females were often depicted as “vases” or “lovers” in the male gaze, and shaped into a single and stereotyped “commodity”. With defining opinions, males always projected their fantasy on stylized females, leading to an increasingly simplified, generalized and even stiffened female images. For example, Weihong Gao in the film *Peacock* initiatively took off her pants in front of a strange man in order to get back the parachute. Hongmei Niu in *Sister Dictionary* always made her cohabitation and pregnancy widely known, and even asked a strange soldier in the street whether she should give birth to a baby without a father. And mirror images in *Jasmine Women* implied the sexual desire of the three heroines. However, after a life-long pursuit of becoming a celebrity, Mo finally froze her youth on a photo viewed by others, and “Li” invited a strange boy in full view of a large crowd. As for “Hua”, whether her behavior was resulted by the sexual desire externalization of a new female, or for the sake of meeting the demands of males for viewing? Actually, her inner world had not been fully opened, and the cognition of the audience is as blurry as the swaying light and shadow. It seems that the female behaviors in response to the eyesight of males in those contemporary films were imposed as they did not conform with the character development and the life logic.

3. Feminism in the Pluralistic Development of Consumer Culture

Milton in *Paradise Lost* echoed a classic expression of the relationship between man and woman: man is made by God, woman is made from man’s rib, and man has the authority of gender in relation to woman [4]. The influence of gender oppression on the course of human civilization is an indisputable fact, and women’s efforts to resist oppression and strive for a voice have never stopped – the emergence and development of feminism is one of the accomplishments of women’s

unremitting resistance. The recognition and acceptance of feminist film in China began in the 1980s with the policy of reform and opening up, and Chinese films absorbed advanced ideas from the West along with the rise of consumer culture. Feminism and cinema art have since become more and more closely integrated, and feminist cinema has diversified, manifesting the subjective expression of female consciousness. Feminism is increasingly combined with cinema, and the theoretical foundation of the feminist film is gradually built.

3.1 Women Who Were Visually Objectified at the Commercial Films

In the 1990s, the new term “marketization” began to be used in all aspects of film creation. In mainland China, the prominence of box office revenues led to the first time that audience needs were put before those of directors, and the female characters in most films were placed as subjects of the gaze of male audiences and male directors. Although female characters were an integral part of the films, their images were virtualized or sexualized to varying degrees and became objects of visual consumption. During this period, the tense and exciting plots, ambiguous words, gorgeous colorful images, and other such external expressions became the realistic needs of the audience, a collective release they sought under the mental pressure of work. Women appear on the screen as objects to be seen. While bodies and desires flooded the screen, the subjectivity of women disappeared. These groups of works, in addition to *Painted Skin* and *Mulan*, are basically dominated by the portrayal of men. Even ancient female characters like those in *Painted Skin* and *Mulan* have the scene stolen by male actors such as Donnie Yen and Chen Kun. Many famous actresses played the role of a pathetic wife, prostitute, or confidant in these martial arts and kung fu films, gun battle films and costume films, becoming “eye candy”. For example, Fan Bingbing played Yiyue in *Battle of Wits*, Gong Li played the Queen in *Curse of the Golden Flower*, and Zhao Wei and Lin Zhiling played Sun Shangxiang candies or accompaniments to create visual effects or to establish the images of male characters. Such commercial films, with the judgment and standards of men in mainstream society as the criterion, produce an image of women based solely on the body. The female characters in the film are both the objects of men’s competition and competitors for their favor, and the meaning of their existence is reduced to attracting men’s attention or to matching the achievements of male characters. The fate of female characters is completely manipulated by male characters, under the absolute hegemony of male discourse.

3.2 “Castrated” Women in Patriarchal Society

In the 1990s, the awareness of women in the majority of films had not yet woken or had only just begun to appear, and the female characters in the films were frequently created by male directors and male writers. The most portrayed characters were still men. Women’s existence was designed for the development of men, and social development was achieved when women were destroyed. Due to the special nature of the Ten-Year Cultural Revolution and the social constraints on speech at that time, the cinematic depiction of that special period was frequently unable to present a clear position, and the inane portrayal of women resulted in a muddled version of film feminism.

1993 saw the release of *Farewell My Concubine*, in which several women were portrayed from the male perspective, as mere appendages of men in a patriarchal society. Because her mother is a prostitute, Cheng Dieyi has suffered humiliation since childhood. From the very beginning, Juxian is molested by a gang of guys, but eventually rescued by a hero who saves her from danger, she then becomes enamored with this “hero”—Duan Xiaolou. She does her best to live a normal life, but she is unable to escape her unhappy background since she is often identified as a prostitute. In the end, she hangs herself in her bridal gown, a symbol of her dream. Comparing Juxian and Duan Xiaolou, Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou, it can be noticed that they both share an unreachable utopian love. Cheng Dieyi’s obstinacy is fidelity, while Juxian is committed to accompanying the husband even in poverty [4]. They both perform the role of the ideal woman dictated by the historical order of power and gender, and as a result, they stay outside the historical process [5].

Duan Jinghua, the wife in *Family Portrait*, exemplifies women's lack of awareness of independence when evaluating, assessing, and resolving difficulties with her obsequiousness, hesitation, and lack of initiative in dealing with family issues. Ah Fang, who dares to oppose the restrictions placed upon her and pursue genuine love in *Jiachou*, places too much hope in men, thereby missing the opportunity to pursue ultimate freedom and love. Wenxiu, the young woman in *Xiu Xiu: The Sent Down Girl* who yearns to return to the city, struggles vigorously for her future but loses her way, pinning all of her hopes on men, and thus burying her youth and vitality. Lust, marriage, and family become the center of their attention, and a form of feminine anxiety permeates their life. The anxiety of desiring these things but not consciously attaching to them forces them to exist on the edge of survival.

3.3 Women Who “Resist Oppression” after Awakening

In contrast to the feminist films of the 1980s, the images of women in the films of the 1990s are more tangible, and possess a feeling of resistance, though they remain extremely constrained. They more accurately reflect social realities, such as the distinction between the lives of concubines and wives in feudal society, and the resistance of rural women to certain events. These feminine images are no longer dependent on male characteristics and are more autonomous. Uneducated and combative women as well as women with a rebellious spirit are all depicted on screen, and female characters, in general, are more vividly portrayed.

3.3.1 Women Who “Strive for Voice”

The narratives in the context of reform and opening up demonstrate more women's courage to defend their rights and interests against the traditional ideology of feudal patriarchy, and women may even become the saviors of others and their families through their own efforts. Following China's reform and opening up, artworks praising women became abundant, but there are few accounts of rural women who bravely took the initiative of “common people suing the government” during the most crucial moment for women.

The Story of Qiu Ju, based on the novel *The Lawsuit of Ten Thousand Families*, was released in 1992. The plot revolves around the desire of rural people in the 1990s to have a son in accordance with patriarchal thinking. Qiu Ju's husband was kicked in the crotch by the village head after an argument and has been incapacitated ever since. Qiu Ju, who is pregnant, seeks legal counsel in the hopes that her husband will get an apology from the village head [6]. This film's plot is dramatic and its characters are unique, notably the role of Qiu Ju, who not only exemplifies the traditional characteristics of rural Chinese women but also mirrors their admirable attributes through her words and actions. The film depicts an independent lady from a rural area using the law to defend her rights and interests. In the 1990s, when the nation's legal consciousness was low and women, as a disadvantaged group, had minimal judicial education, the appearance of *The Story of Qiu Ju* resulted in a commotion and a breakthrough in the awakening of rural women's legal consciousness. In the film, Qiu Ju is a woman born into poverty and with little education; nonetheless, with self-respect and self-love, optimism and unyieldingness, purity, simplicity, and courage, she utterly subverts the image of rural Chinese women. This “apology” of village head for Qiu Ju's husband is not only a cosmetic “sorry”; rather, from Qiu Ju's perspective, she wishes to lessen the oppression of “man predilection, male chauvinism, and patriarchal ideology” in rural areas, reclaim women's freedom to speak, and restore their dignity and rights. The film exhibits a profound humanistic concern for the condition of women's lives and depicts the awakening of a woman's self-awareness as a subject. Her image has a significant impact on the mending of society. Not only do these films have box office appeal, but they have tremendous worth and relevance as both works of cinematic art and representations of social life. These films depict every facet of 21st-century Chinese social life. These social events and all forms of life not only enhance the image of Chinese film in the twenty-first century, but also serve as an essential social record.

3.3.2 Women Who Do Not “Compromise with Fate”

The growth of feminist film is closely tied to the evolution of the times and the changing social context. Cinema may be viewed as a documentation of life and a glimpse of existence in all of its manifestations. Therefore, in the repertoire of Chinese feminist films, female characters frequently appear with more advanced ideas and consciousness than their contemporaries, acting as a beacon on the path to the awakening of women’s consciousness, guiding the sublimation of female images and fostering the development of feminist films.

Since *Red Sorghum*, Zhang Yimou has created a series of folkloric historical movies such as *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* that depicts a succession of rebellious rural women in traditional settings, leading the way in introducing the world to Chinese women. In *Raise the Red Lantern*, Zhang Yimou depicts a rebellious concubine, Songlian, whose sense of rebellion is manifested in the struggle between wives and concubines. Her resistance to male authority is not obvious, but from the fact that Songlian occasionally asks the husband to “turn off the lights” and disagrees with his decisions, she can be seen to have a rebellious spirit. In medieval Chinese culture, only the male had the right to personhood. In feudal society, under the domination of male authority, it was difficult for women to develop their individuality and feeling of freedom, which progressively led to their eventual submission to feudal male power. Consequently, Songlian fakes a pregnancy to earn favor with a feudal system that declares “mother is prized according to her son”, but ultimately loses the favor when things go awry, and is driven insane by the jeering and disdain [7]. The director aggressively defies tradition, celebrating thriving energy and the worth of life. He encourages women with bright personalities to live according to their own free will. These depictions of women based on their creator’s aspirations are inspiring and enlightening. His works have a special appeal for their depiction of traditional femininity, such as Jiu’er in *Red Sorghum*, Ju Dou in *Ju Dou*, and Zhao Di in *My Father and Mother*. They never give in to fate, think and love as they wish, and live a life of passion. In actuality, they differ from the typical happy ending, yet within Zhang Yimou’s intellectual framework, they stand as successes.

3.4 Modern Women with Gender Consciousness

In the 1980s, Chinese feminist films steadily distanced themselves from the traditional portrayals of women, and in the 1990s, female directors began to promote women’s gender consciousness and express their feminist ambitions with more confidence. With rebellious vocabulary and a daring, avant-garde style, *Perpetual Motion* depicts the love lives of four accomplished middle-aged women [8]. The story’s backstory follows Huang Zhenzhen’s conception: Niu Niu, the editor of a fashion magazine, invites three of her most dubious girlfriends to her house for Chinese New Year in order to discover which is her husband’s mistress. They are Qin Qin, a beautiful young fashion model, Mrs. Ye, a real estate agent, and La La, a talented artist. The film aggressively conveys the interaction between women and men through the four ladies’ discussion. Instead of being wives and mothers in the household with their husbands and children, the four women celebrate the Chinese New Year in the enclosed courtyard, subverting the notion that family is the focus of women’s lives. The four women openly discuss sex, menopause, marriage, one-night stands, and even eat chicken feet in an unattractive manner like males, exclaiming “That’s fucking great, fuck!” The film’s promotion of women’s independence is readily apparent, and it is through its bold, avant-garde camera and language that it unleashes the repressed desire of women to speak out, touching the long-numbered audience with exaggerated cinematic techniques in the hope that people will think differently and pay attention to women’s right to speak out and women’s rights as subjects [9]. Qiu Yi in *Hongfen*, who escapes the transformation of prostitutes by the PLA, decisively leaves the cowardly Lao Pu, shaved her head to become a nun, and ultimately adopts the child of Lao Pu and Xiao Calyx. Wen Xiu in *Xiu Xiu: The Sent Down Girl* is also the result of director Chen Chong’s strong female self-awareness. As the 21st century progresses, Chinese women directors have grown more self-assured and sophisticated, producing films that inspire a new understanding of women, gender, and masculinity by depicting a different picture of women than in the past. The film *Night and Fog*, for another

instance, exposes domestic abuse perpetrated by men against women and the wanton trampling of women's dignity, taking a perspective distinct from that generally found among films addressing social issues. The promotion of gender consciousness in Chinese feminist films is also evident in our contemporary historical circumstances. In addition, we need to affirm that feminism in Chinese films in the 1990s has laid an important foundation for the future development of the feminism in Chinese films. For example, the film "My Sister", released in 2021, tells a family-affection story that a sister who loses her parents confronts the question of whether to pursue an independent life or raise her younger brother. This film mirrors the long-standing patriarchal problem in Chinese society and the conflict between children in two-child families, which can be traced back to Chinese films in the 1990s. This kind of phenomenon in Chinese society can also be seen in the documentary "Sister" launched in 1996. It undoubtedly exerts influence on later films in the development of the times. It not only puts forward many creative themes and artistic inspirations related to feminism, but also provides a reference and model for the development of feminism in later Chinese films.

4. Conclusion

Under the influence of reform, opening up, and the new era, in China, women are no longer overly constrained by men's entitlements, but have equal rights with men, their own way of thinking and independent personalities, and the ability to choose their own lives, and have become players of multiple roles, urging audiences to accord women greater importance. As a crucial time of revolution for the Chinese film industry, the 1990s supplied numerous ideas for the development of contemporary Chinese cinema. Not only did Chinese films flourish and win numerous international awards, but they also sparked a new wave of literature and folklore, with the fifth generation and sixth-generation directors paving the way by creating innovative films from a variety of perspectives, ranging from cynical and marginal topics to personal and personalized ones. The films of the 1990s have left moviegoers with a powerful and lasting impression. As a result of these shifts in dominant ideology and the market, feminist ideas grew increasingly intertwined with films, and the theoretical basis for feminist films was progressively established. An abundance of female characters appeared, the "visually consumed" women of commercial films, "emasculated" awakened women in patriarchal societies, awakened women "resisting oppression," and gender-conscious modern women [10]. Nevertheless, the feminist consciousness that was so vigorously explored in the 1990s showed a reluctant retreat and a certain return to patriarchal traditions due to the influence of the box office. As with all revolutions, the process of stripping feminist narratives and expressions from the male subject was painful and lengthy, rife with contradictions and repetitions. In this ongoing thought, practice, and conflict, however, the new meaning of feminism is reconstructed, causing more women to pursue their own ideals and therefore changing the future of the world.

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