

# The Change of TV Series Targeted Chinese Female Audiences and Its Reflection on the Women's Movement in China

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**Abstract.** Chinese female audiences' attitudes towards TV dramas have changed. They are no longer inclined to the romantic themes of idol dramas and criticize male characters in previous TV dramas. The current research on television dramas has not carried out special research from the perspective of female audiences. This research will supplement this research perspective and further explore the connection between the changes in female audiences' consciousness and the Chinese women's movement. This research will guide television workers to produce works that can better respond to the demands of female audiences, and inspire female audiences to be aware of women's issues in real life expressed in television dramas, so as to further promote the development of the Chinese women's movement. This research uses quantitative and qualitative research to analyze the changes in the genre of television dramas and the changes in audience evaluations, and concludes that female audiences have an increased awareness of feminism, and they are using social media to deal with misogyny, beautify men, and ignore women's social value in television dramas.

**Keywords:** Television drama; idol drama; soap opera; male character; female audience.

## 1. Introduction

In China, TV dramas have changed from romantic to realistic themes. Social media has expanded the discussion of television dramas, as audience feedback can be responded to in a timely manner. So, are female audiences satisfied with TV dramas? How do they comment on these new dramas, and can their comments influence the creation of TV dramas? Can we peep a corner of the Chinese feminism movement from the relationship between television dramas and female audiences?

Historical research generally believes that soap operas are the embodiment of women's values. It is widely believed that women prefer love and family themes, some feminist theorists have argued that soap operas spring from a feminine aesthetic, in contrast to most prime-time television [1]. "Both Brown (1994) and media analyst John Fiske (1987) assert that each of these characteristics of soap operas is strongly associated with feminine values and culture" [2].

However, some studies have also shown that the diversity of women has not been properly displayed in television dramas. Most of the female characters shown in TV dramas are created by men or based on male's taste. Positive changes in the treatment of lower-status groups primarily follow a two-stage process, recognition and respect [3]. In gender studies, acknowledging the presence of women on television screens in this study can be seen, and respect is measured by whether women are portrayed in stereotypical roles. Because this diversity is essential for fairness and positivity.

The current research on feminism study related to television dramas in China is mostly limited to the plot, such as the characters in the plot or the logic of the plot, and less research is done from the changes of female audiences. Therefore, this paper conducts supplementary research from this perspective.

## 2. Research Methods

This research is completed by qualitative research and quantitative research. In the qualitative study, the female audience's attitude change towards male characters in television dramas is used as

a case study, and the quantitative study shows that the audience’s favorite TV drama themes have changed. Both of these changes show the enhancement of women’s self-awareness.

First, the paper takes the role of the hero Daoming Si in “Meteor Garden” as a case study. “Meteor Garden” is a Taiwanese idol drama that has a wider influence in East Asia. It has been a flop in South Korea, Japan, and mainland China. It has a long broadcast time span. The play revolves around the love and friendship story of four rich boys and Cinderella. The male protagonist’s ruthless, domineering and other characteristics are loved by a large number of female audiences. However, in the 2018 version, the character (non-actor) in the play was widely criticized on social media, believing that the character had negative qualities such as school violence, cold violence, and bullying.

Second, this paper adopts the method of data analysis, uses the research data of CCTV CSM and the TV drama prosperity index published by Datawin Film and Television Observation to evaluate the viewing situation of TV dramas. CSM owns the world’s largest radio and television audience survey network, and publishes the proportion of different audiences of different TV dramas year by year [4, 5]. Such as the proportion of elderly users, the proportion of young users, the proportion of male and female users, etc. I first collected data on the proportion of female audiences from 2008 to 2022, and then summarized the trend of changes in the proportion of female audiences.

The Datawin calculates the attention of the audience to various TV genres, and the ratio of the degree to which TV series are expected by the audience is posted monthly on Weibo. The fans data is not included, so it has a value-oriented reference from audiences [6]. I first collected the prosperity data of the popular dramas it summarized, and sorted out the data of female-related themes separately, and compared the popularity and richness of female themes.



Fig 1. Posters of different versions of Meteor Garden in East Asian countries and regions

### 3. The Change of Female Views toward Chinese TV Series

Recently, the male characters in TV dramas that were once popular have been re-examined by female audiences [7]. For example, the play “Romance in the Rain” is adapted from the novel of Qiong Yao, a famous mandarin love novel author, and it takes the Shanghai naval lord Lu family in the 1930s as the main storyline, telling the love story of Lu Yiping and He Shuhuan. Since the show was broadcast in 2000, it has been broadcast on many TV Channels in Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China. and it caused an overwhelming response, as it got the highest annual ratings in

mainland China and Taiwan [8]. In the play, He Shuhuan was ambiguous with Lu Yiping's sister, and then fell in love with Lu Yiping, betrayed Lu Yiping, returned to Lu Yiping's sister again, and held a wedding. At the wedding, He Shuhuan fled the wedding again to find Lu Yiping. At the end of the film, the male protagonist eventually returned to Lu Yiping after joining the army with an injured leg. The characters in the play also watched the couple embrace and kiss at the station. The audience was very moved, and like the people in the play, they blessed the couples. In 2012 and 2022, the popularity of the play persisted unabated, and some of the plots once again sparked discussions among netizens, including the reversal of the evaluation of the character He Shuhuan. The audience evaluated He Shuhuan as a "scumbag", a man who only cares about his own feelings, does not recognize the social precepts of women, and plays with sisterhood [9].

The hit drama "Gentlemen of the Upper East District" in early September 2022 is a male group portrait drama launched by Zhang Han, the actor of the 2009 mainland version of "Meteor Garden", as a producer, director and actor. It is about 4 male college roommates, getting love and career after graduation. However, the play was not as welcome as the original "Meteor Garden" by female audiences. It was controversial due to disrespecting women. The scenes of pulling chest straps and "salty pig hands" in the play caused a wave of negative comments, and was criticized as the "greasy and embarrassing" work of the year by public opinion. These classic romantic episodes of idol dramas have led to it getting the lowest score on Douban in the history of TV dramas, 2.1 points, nearly 200,000 netizens scored minutes, more than 96 % give a one-star negative review [10]. Due to a large number of negative reviews, the drama was removed from all platforms on September 26, 2022 [11].

In general, male characters are facing major challenges, female audiences have put forward new demands, and behaviors such as acting handsome and cool in the past can no longer satisfy today's female audiences.

First, the proportion of female audiences has increased. During the period from 2008 to 2011, the proportion of female-themed TV dramas in the Chinese TV drama market fluctuated between 27-33%, and by 2018-2022, female-themed TV series accounted for 47%-49% [12].

Second, the television dramas genre has changed. Around 2011, female-themed dramas were predominantly fantasy dramas and costume dramas, attracting female audiences through charismatic male characters and twists and turns of love plots. For example, in 2011, the popular idol dramas "Palace" and "Striking Heart"; in 2019-2022, the number of urban dramas was the largest. For example, "Everything is Good" expresses the rising dilemma of women in patriarchal families. "Thirty Only" reflects the hard work of women taking into account both family and workplace, and "Golden Years" shows women's friendship, and once again pays attention to the female friendship that has long given way to love and has been stigmatized [13].

To sum up, under the circumstance that female audiences dominate the market, multiple elements of non-love, such as family affection, growth, inspiration, etc., are presented in various themes and have occupied high ratings one after another. With women as the protagonists, the content that pays attention to women's living conditions and self-growth is increasing.

#### 4. Discussion

To sum up, female audiences are re-examining the creation of television series. They question the behavior of beautifying male characters in television, rationalizing male disrespect for women in the name of love, and put forward new requirements for the shaping of male characters. Characters that can be favored by female audiences by pretending to be cool are no longer popular. Correspondingly, love themes do not occupy a high market share, and urban dramas related to women's reality have increased, such as content discussing workplace and friendship.

The creation of film and television dramas comes from life, and in reality, the audience's attitude is also being timely feedback through social media, so film and television dramas can reflect changes in real life. This change shows that the lives of female audiences are not only rich in love, friendship, family, career, etc., but also that they are the masters of their own lives, no longer objects. As Eaton

(2008) described, during the historical period, women's reality was portrayed from the perspective of heterosexual men in visual art and literary creation, and women were influenced by the works and then self-objectified to please heterosexual male audiences [14]. The current changes in domestic dramas show that Chinese women are no longer trying to transform themselves according to the gaze of men, but instead dare to express their criticism and demands of men. Therefore, the current changes in film and television dramas are actually a manifestation of the Chinese women's movement.

## 5. Conclusion

There are also issues such as misogyny and invisible women's social contribution in the current television dramas. For example, in the anti-epidemic dramas, the female doctors and female volunteers in real life were changed to the male, and the boy patient who did not cooperate was changed to a little girl. Similarly, even if it is a female theme, also faced with the fact that women in the play easily get promoted in the workplace because of the superiority of their class, and it fails to convey the unfair treatment of real women in the workplace.

However, compared with the previous Chinese television drama market, the proportion of female social reality themes has increased. And female audiences began to view the content presented in the play in a critical way. This remains a progressive manifestation of Chinese feminism.

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