

An Analysis of the Construction of Female Image in Chinese Mainland's TV Series

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Abstract: In recent years, feminist TV series have increased in Chinese mainland, with great female dramas and female group dramas dominating the screen, seemingly showing the awakening of female consciousness and the improvement of female status. This paper compares the construction of female images in two dimensions, vertically and horizontally, comparing the portrayal of female images in Chinese mainland TV series since the 1980s, and horizontally comparing the portrayal of female images in Western TV series in the same period with the portrayal of male images in Chinese mainland TV series. Through the comparison results, we explore the deep-seated reasons for the differences and similarities in the construction of female images in different times from four aspects. This paper finds that under the rule of thousands of years of feudalism, the traditional culture of Chinese society requires women to be “virtuous wives and mothers” and to be “submissive and virtuous”, which largely confines women's spiritual freedom. Even in today's highly developed modern civilization, women can be educated outside the confines of feudalism, fall in love and work freely due to their improved economic and legal status, but the long-standing gender bias in society still makes women suffer from unfair treatment and unreasonable demands in the family and workplace environment. This is reflected in the dissemination of TV series, which means that no matter how many feminist TV series there are and how dramatic the plots are, the female protagonists eventually need to depend on men to achieve success and will eventually return to their families, while TV series that exposes the reality and show the plight of women are unable to propose good solutions and always stay at the level of “asking questions”. To some extent, the TV series reflects the social reality that Chinese women have not yet truly moved toward equality, liberty, and openness, and that feminism in China still has a long way to go.

1. Introduction

In China, the proportion of women in higher education has reached 52.5% [1], the highest in the world. The female labor force participation rate is 69% [2], also ranking first internationally. Women's self-awareness is awakening, and Chinese women are increasingly eager to create personal values, but the patriarchal consciousness in society is still dominant, and there is still room for women to take the lead in the discussion of topics in the public sphere, and there is an urgent need for a film and television culture that explores women's values.

Therefore, the number of TV series related to female themes has increased dramatically in recent years. Take the Douban platform as an example, using [female] as a keyword to define the tag and searching for [Chinese mainland] [TV series], the relevant results show the following.[3]

Table 1 Douban platform female theme TV series.

Period	Amount	Representative Plays
Before the 80s	0	
The 80s	1	Fences, women, and dogs
The 90s	12	Empress Wu Cheh Tien, Ancient ship woman and net, etc.
The 00s	48	Pink Lady, Palace of Desire, Secret History of Xiaozhuang, Oranges are red, etc.
The 10s	25	Story of Yanxi Palace, The Story of Ming Lan, Ode to Joy, The First Half of My Life, etc.
The 20s(Up to June 2022)	45	Nothing But Thirty, My Best Friend's Story, Danger of Her, Remembrances of Things Past, etc.

On the one hand, TV series as a cultural product bear the imprint of the times and reflect the social status quo of the times. From the characterization, experience, way of thinking, and values of the characters, we can analyze the degree of social and economic development and civilization as well as the mainstream values of the society at present. Therefore, the female image construction of TV series is actually a true reflection of the women of the era.[4]

On the other hand, as a mass media, the content of TV series also affects the cognition and awareness of the audience, especially in today's developed social media, people can discuss the characters or scenes in TV series anytime and anywhere, and TV series have a wider and deeper influence than before. Therefore, the construction of female images and the discussion of women's dilemmas in TV series will directly affect women's identification with themselves and their social identity and the development of feminism in reality.[4]

This paper will compare the construction of the female image in Chinese and foreign TV series and male-themed TV and film work in Chinese mainland since the 1980s from both vertical and horizontal dimensions, analyzing the reasons for the changes in female character construction.

2. Understanding of Female TV Series

When it comes to female film and television series, there is no clear definition of the comparison, nor are there platforms or institutions that classify it. In order to give a more accurate definition, it is first necessary to clarify what the relevant concepts are.

2.1. Feminism

The phrase "feminism" has been around for thousands of years, and as society has evolved, feminists have moved from simply demanding rights from society to understanding society from a "female" perspective and thinking rationally about it. "Feminism" originated in Europe and the United States and is also known as feminism and feminist liberation. "Feminism" also embodies women's desire for gender equality and attempts to achieve a balance with men in society, but it focuses more on the criticism and reconstruction of gender culture of both sexes and attempts to self-reflect from a female perspective.[5]

2.2. Female-Oriented

The phrase "female-oriented" was first coined in Japan in the 1950s, meaning "female-targeted", and was originally a consumerist concept, but with the rapid development of Japan's economy and increasing cultural soft power, the concept also changed to refer to literary and artistic works with women as the audience and the main consumers.[6]

2.3. Great Female Drama

The heroine must be the absolute "center" of the character and the drama, the character must be independent, strong, and intelligent, the plot should reflect the growth of the heroine, and the time dimension is usually long. Many great female dramas are often film and television adaptations of female-oriented online novels.[7]

In conclusion, this paper attempts to provide a broader and more inclusive definition of female TV series, including but not limited to those with female themes, featuring a single woman or group of women, female creators, IP adaptations of online female-oriented novels, and those with women as the primary audience and that can also reflect feminism.

3. Vertical Dimension: the Development of Female TV Series

3.1. Family-Oriented Wife and Mother

In the early 1990s, the most common and popular image of women in China's TV dramas was that of traditional women with family as their top priority. In December 1990, a 50-episode long-running TV series "Crave" landed on CCTV, which took the whole country by storm and created a sensation of 10,000 people. Liu Huifang, the heroine of Crave, is a typical traditional Chinese woman who is

gentle, kind, and endures humiliation. Faced with the heavy pressure of life, she chooses to make compromises and take on the burden. She gives everything she has to her husband, her children, and her family. The image of women represented by Liu Huifang has been used as a moral benchmark for the whole society to evaluate women for quite a long time afterward.[8]

3.2. Babe in the Wood of Mary Sue Style

Mary Sue, a new buzzword in the literary world, refers to a fictional female protagonist in the same genre who is not in the real drama, but is too perfect and gets attention from several male protagonists and has a narcissistic complex; nowadays it is used to refer to a woman's dream of perfect female heroism. [9]

Around 2000, a series of desktop idol dramas represented by "Meteor Garden", "The Prince Becomes a Frog" and "Princess Little Sister" started to become popular on the screen. Subsequently, Chinese mainland idol dramas also chose to follow suit, with "Ugly Girl" and "Let's Watch Meteor Shower" also gaining notable ratings. Since then, the babe in the wood image officially became the representative of the female screen image during this period. In these idol dramas, the female protagonists are mostly mediocre Cinderella-type characters who are usually stuck in a difficult situation in life for various reasons and do not have enough ability to change the status quo themselves, when the glittering prince-like male protagonist will come down from the sky and fall in love with the female protagonist while saving her from the difficult situation in life.[10]

3.3. Career-Oriented Great Female

In the 2010s, on the one hand, women gradually realized that it was unrealistic to rely on Prince Charming to change their fate, and on the other hand, the progress and development of society gave women more opportunities. At this time, women's consciousness is gradually rising, and more women are no longer satisfied with love but are eager to achieve career success and realize their true selves through personal struggle. Since then, the female screen image has entered another very familiar stage, the period of career-oriented female protagonists, and there are countless representative works of film and television dramas in this period, such as "Legend of Zhenhuan", "Legend of Chu Qiao", "To The Sky Kingdom" and so on. In these episodes, the female protagonists usually start low and go high, with the help of a number of male characters, all the way to the top of life.[11]

3.4. New Immigrant Urban Women

Since the time of China's reform and opening up, with the increase in education, the refinement of the social division of labor, and the development of urban construction, women have separated from their families of origin, broken away from the framework of the traditional order, and moved to the city to establish themselves in an unfamiliar city and achieve different goals and values in life. With the increase of the urban migrant population and the emergence of new immigrants who are "in the country but not at home", dramas such as "Beijing Women's Illustrated", "Shanghai Women's Illustrated" and "I'm Fine in Another Country" have become the latest trend, featuring the professional and emotional dilemmas of urban women who are trying to establish their roots in first-tier cities.[12]

4. Horizontal Dimension: Differences in Female TV Series

4.1. Comparison of Chinese and Western Female TV Series

"Sex and the City", dubbed "the birth of American women's television", premiered on HBO in 1998, paving the way for a slew of subsequent women's television shows. "Sex and the City" is the story of four single women living in urban New York City who find true love in a materialistic world and rely on their friendship to get by. It arose from the third wave of the feminist movement in the United States. Postmodern feminism began to deconstruct traditional feminist binaries after the 1990s, establishing women as subjects in their own right. This has a strong influence on the four female characters in Sex and the City. They are well-educated, work in "elite" professions, and dare to break free from the bonds of marriage in order to pursue their own needs.[13]

One of the most important dramas to emerge in Chinese mainland was Li Shaohong's "The Palace of Daming". Empress Wu's ambitions are also depicted from a female perspective in this drama, and her fluid and complex mother-daughter relationship with Princess Taiping restores her inner struggle to seize power. This unique perspective and internal analysis liberate Wu Zetian's character to become a full-fledged "human being." [13]

The "Legend of Zhenhuan", which started in 2011, seemed to find a golden key to opening the market. It was later called the real beginning of big female drama in China. During this period the dramas that emerged during this period all adopted the same story pattern, that is, the female protagonists were all very pure and kind, and only after experiencing harm did they start to crave power. They attribute their misfortunes to their personal fate rather than to structural problems, and are forced to awaken and resist, not to participate in the conflict out of self-seeking, and most of them return to their traditional roles as women after a happy ending. [13]

Across the pond that same year, "The Broken Sisters" won several Emmy Awards upon its broadcast. Not only did Max and Caroline showcase their career struggles, but they also accomplished a sort of "female gaze". The ubiquitous gender play makes it seem as if the female characters have some sense of bodily autonomy - they don't shy away from talking about "sex", especially in front of men. There is no doubt that sexual liberation has always been an important topic in women's liberation. Yet "The Broken Sisters" not only needs a comedic positioning to defuse gender conflict and audience discomfort but also deliberately weakens the presence of men in the plot. This certainly makes it a lot easier to highlight feminism, but it doesn't solve the actual problem In real life, it's impossible to 'cut out' the 'fathers' 'censored'. Just as Max prides himself on his personal liberation, so too does Zhenhuan's position as Empress Dowager not prove the triumph of women. The untold number of women in the harem who were reduced to reproductive roles or condemned by other members of the family meant that women did not belong to themselves, either mentally or physically. While Zhenhuan's success may seem to give the story a happy ending, it is essentially a personal victory that replaces the triumph of the female community over the oppressive power of men.[13]

By 2019, *Deadly Women* has begun to use symbolic elements to reflect more social issues. *Fatal Woman* is more like a chocolate with a feminine consciousness at its core wrapped in multiple discourses, reflecting the intersection of current Western thinking. It implies that feminism goes far beyond its own topic, caring for other disadvantaged groups in this intersectional environment. Unlike "Legend of Chu Qiao" in 2017, in which Yuan Chun takes out his anger at losing his power struggle and being betrayed by men on Chu Qiao, Beth Ann in *Fatal Woman* feels compassion for her husband's cheating partner after she knows enough about him to get rid of him. The drama may not have found a harmonious template for the two sexes and attributed the resolution of conflicts to violence, but its fierce struggle against patriarchy, its construction of female subjectivity, and its concern for other groups on the road to liberation are quite worthy of recognition. [13]

4.2. The Development of Male Characters in Film and Television Works

The current culture of "fresh meat" and "fans" is an entertainment phenomenon born out of the rising status of women, and men are becoming a commodity sold in television dramas. We see more and more topless men in movies and dramas, either in the gym, showing off their muscles to the audience, or in the shower, shaking off their hair in a sexy way with a splash of water in the hazy scenes. From TFboys to idol trainees, the popular idols active on TV screens are gradually moving towards the soft and feminine route. The birth of "nurturing idols" is aimed at the motherly mentality of women.[14]

John Berger, a British literary critic, has suggested that women often have a double gaze, one of which is the male gaze and observation. And now, at least in the hit variety show "The brother who plucked the thorns", men are the objects of the "gaze". [14]

As a counterbalance to female dramas, male dramas based on male-oriented online novels have also started to surface. On the one hand, these male dramas cater to men's demand for the construction of masculinity; On the other hand, in order to win the female market, we also integrate female needs in the process of masculinity construction, so as to capture the largest audience possible.[15]

“The Superfluous Son-in-Law”, is a masculine drama against a great female heroine drama, the entire play concentrates on the male protagonist Ning Yi rescuing the female protagonist Su Taner from her predicament, with the female protagonist only needing to be submissive and dependent throughout. Ning Yi’s “heroic rescue” fulfills traditional Chinese gender constructs, highlighting the discourse of male identity and authority. During the narrative, the play portrays the hero, Ning Yi, as a “domineering hero”, satisfying the traditional Chinese cultural influence on men and “blowing up” them. At the same time, women exist as dichotomous characters. The play’s heroine, Su Taner, is ostensibly an “independent woman” but is actually the “woman to be saved” in the traditional narrative, which devalues women through symbolism. [15]

4.3. Breakthrough in the Portrayal of Female Characters

The portrayal of women in our film and television culture seems to satisfy the aesthetic and psychological needs of women in a male-dominated society only by fully demonstrating women’s weakness and need for protection, and by highlighting men’s strong and resolute or calm and mature roles. In a sense, love is like a crown of thorns, an exquisite punishment. The romantic narrative associated with love, which is seen as the pinnacle of the female experience, is a more insidious moral manipulation of all women. Only under the guise of love does the pursuit of women’s lives have value and meaning, and only when women in the second sex have completed the experience of life as the first set of men can they be considered women who meet the standards of social value.[16]

“Iron Detective” and “Qing Yu Nian” break away from this paradigm of female infighting, legitimizing women’s pursuit of career advancement to the upper echelons of the workplace and power, and fixing this desire for a leap in power, free from the desire to please and cater to the male elite. The two female characters, Wan Heihua and Li Yunrui, are women in the upper echelons of the workplace who esteem power and status and are social elites who esteem competence and tact. [16]

As a member of the feudal royal family, Li Yunrui, the eldest princess in “Qing Yu Nian”, is unmarried and does not fall in love under the enormous pressure of ancient feudal ethics. Her appearance greatly expands the female perspective that has always been limited to “female competition” in ancient court dramas, and it seems that female characters have finally become intellectually qualified to compete with men, and no longer revolve around men’s lifelong interest in competing for favor in the harem.[16]

As a female Chief Superintendent of Police in Hong Kong’s West Kowloon district, Wan Heihua in “The Iron Detective” is ruthless, and is determined to advance in her career. After the death of her husband, she does not fall in love, and after the loss of her son, she is able to regain her strength and is only interested in power struggles. For the first time, the two plays portrayed two women at the top of the hierarchy who wielded great power, placing female and male wisdom in the same dimension. This redefinition of women’s image expresses a new view and understanding of life for women of the times, which has clearly transcended the narrow and ethical confines of the trivial family narrative.[16]

This attention to power and strategy itself is no longer special because the subject is a woman, which is a shock and dissolution of the collective unconscious gender aphasia of women at the top of the workplace, demonstrating the awakening of women’s subjective consciousness and their reasonable pursuit of power. It demonstrates the awakening of women’s subjective consciousness and their legitimate quest for power, freeing them from the shackles of the image of the “weak woman”. In *Women and Power: A Manifesto*, Mary Beard critiques the default rule of women speaking as objects in the public sphere throughout time. She notes that “they can defend the special interests of their group, or assert their victimhood. Other than this, all other content is sensitive and off-limits.” The narratives and imagery of women as the highest rulers and power holders in the administrative unit in “The Iron Detective” and “Qing Yu Nian” are not limited to traditional women’s issues and do not specialize in women in power conspiracies, which broadens and generalizes the space given to career women in the public sphere.[16]

5. Diversity of Female Images

As can be seen from the previous article, there is a peculiar echoing relationship between the

presentation of women's issues in film and television dramas and the changing role of women in the social, economic, and political spheres. Taking stock of the image of women in film and television dramas over time, it is evident that the topic of women itself has changed as well as the development and change of society's perception of women. Under vertical and horizontal comparison, it is evident that society has developed to the present day, and the status of women has clearly risen, from the family to society, and even to the top of society, from dependence on the family to the status of independence.

Especially after 2000, the image of female characters in TV dramas began to come alive. In 2004, in "Pink Girl", four girls with different personalities lived in a house and boldly explored the issue of men and love. Wan Ling, the "10,000-strong girl" who seeks perfect love but does not want to be bound by marriage, often talks about her love secrets and "treacherously" regards men as "prey". In "The New Marriage Era", Gu Xiaoxi, a magazine editor, maintains her hobbies despite the tedious family life after marriage and insists on leaving a space at home for the piano although she is not rich. It has to do with the woman herself. For the first time in a TV drama, a female protagonist emphasizes the freedom of choice in childbirth, clearly pointing out that women are not tools, that marriage does not mean that they must have children, and that it is not natural to pass on a family name, and that women have the right to pursue their own lives.

5.1. Limitations of Female Characterization

5.1.1. Portrayal of Older Female Characters

Looking back at the media portrayal of middle-aged women in TV dramas, the labels are all negative and derogatory: "cheap and money-hungry women", "loud old mothers", "nosy mothers-in-law", "marriage pressuring mother-in-law", "bratty old woman who dances in the square", "Minky noblewoman with more rings than fingers"[10]

These "annoying and disliked" media images of middle-aged women are not the real picture of Chinese society today. The media images of middle-aged women are extremely distorted, and the joy, sorrow, and confusion of women in their middle age are not conveyed in a realistic way. At the same time, the same type of men do not appear in the dramas, and the annoyingly long tongues become the preserve of women. Men are more often the mediums who speak little, who are reluctant to engage with women, and who are afraid of getting involved in their terrible wars.[10]

5.1.2. The Solution to the Plight of Females

Whether it's a traditional housewife or a great female protagonist in the ascendant, whether it's a virtual situation or real life, a strong and independent female protagonist needs all kinds of male characters to help her solve her problems, men always have a higher status and power, for example, in "The Legend of Zhenhuan", although the female protagonist Zhenhuan is smart and full of wisdom, besides relying on the strength of her sisters in the harem, she still needs a series of male characters such as her lover, King Guojun, her friend, Dr. Wen, and eunuch Su Peisheng to rescue her from the fire at the critical moment.[7]

In realistic themes, such as "The Perfect Match", the conflict between two couples is a real dilemma faced by real-life "professional women" and "housewives", who go against the traditional social rule of "men are in charge of the outside world and women are in charge of the inside". The working women defy the traditional social rule of "men are the mainstay of the family" and face the challenges from the workplace while carrying the pressure of society's expectation of women to be "good wives and mothers", while the housewives have long been neglected for their contribution and humble family status, leading their husbands to regard their wives as worthless. The audience lamented the plot as realistic at the same time, forcing a happy ending let the audience straight "rotten". In fact, female viewers get their self-identity from films and dramas and expect to find solutions to their dilemmas, but unfortunately, under the mainstream values of society, the writers still choose to avoid acute social problems and treat women's plight negatively, returning to marriage and happy family life as the only ending for women.

5.2. Women's Voices from Scratch

The play “Fence, Woman and Dog” from the 1980s is a good reflection of the image of women in this era. Zaohua is a representative female character who, like other women of the time, is hard-working, kind, honest, and simple, and who puts up with her husband's “hegemony” but keeps quiet. The portrayal of women in the 1980s film and television works was mostly to show the reality of women's lack of independent thinking and their blank conception of female consciousness. With the advent of market economy reform, women were dependent on men and “protected” by them, and their sense of independence was weak.[18]

In the 1990s, women’s consciousness gradually developed, and the image of women shifted from flat to multifaceted and multi-layered. Women were no longer a single, tolerant, kind, and man-centered image, but were changing with the development of the social economy and were becoming independent and knowledgeable women. In the film “Beijinger in New York”, Ah Chun is a self-reliant woman with outstanding talents and wisdom. Unlike the traditional women of the old society, Ah Chun appears in the public eye as a “strong woman”, conveying the idea that women can be independent and self-reliant and do not rely on men to develop their own careers.[18]

The portrayal of this image further promotes the development of women's consciousness. In recent years, there has been a clear shift from traditional feminism to post-feminism in dramas and television dramas, from “The Legend of Zhenhuan” to “Ode to Joy” and now to “Nothing But Thirty”. The female character here is no longer the one who loses her voice, but the dominant one who has the right to speak, and she is no longer the victim in the relationship with men, but the active one who can cooperate with them, changing from the image of the other to the construction of the self-image and the awakening of female consciousness, finally realizing the return from theory to reality.[17]

According to Foucault's discourse of rights, the right to social discourse determines the system of truth and knowledge, and the amount of knowledge stored is proportional to the power of discourse. In the feminist view, women in patriarchal societies are always discursively absent, and men use their own discourse system to dominate ideologically and consolidate their absolute dominance, so women should rise up and fight men for the right to speak. Postfeminism, however, does not advocate that women should compete with men for the right to speak, nor does it treat women as absolute losers, but rather as the dominators of discourse by inventing their own language and making their own voices heard. In “Nothing But Thirty”, Gu Jia, a full-time mother, contradicts the traditional “gentle and virtuous” female discourse system and reinvents her own unique discourse system, which is a departure from the traditional discourse. In her life, she plays the role of a superhero mother with high intelligence and emotional intelligence, and despite being a full-time wife, she still takes absolute initiative in the family discourse. But when his son is bullied, he can also roll up his sleeves and fight, fully reflecting the multifaceted nature of the character and showing his dominant position in the discourse. In addition, in her career, in order to save her company from bankruptcy, Gu Jia enters the wife's circle alone and pulls in results for the company, reflecting the independent and self-reliant side of a girl, breaking the shackles of the traditional feminist discourse system on women, freeing women from the struggle with men and focusing on the development of women’s own personality. The woman has become the dominant voice in the discourse.[17]

5.3. Changes in the Relationship between Women

The influence of both gender stereotypes and genre narratives has often led to the demeaning and overt denigration of girlfriend friendships in films and television dramas. The competition is usually aimed at the male protagonist, and the supporting female character is often vilified to elevate the female protagonist and confine her success to the same-sex competition game, while the male protagonist often stays out of the game or helps the female protagonist, acting as a “referee” in the competition game. However, as American feminist historian Marilyn Aron and novelist Donovan Brown argue in *Girlfriends: A History of Female Bonding*, “girl’s friendship” began to become more visible as women grew in literacy, socioeconomic resources, and civil rights. The term “bromance” refers to a private, intimate relationship between women that has evolved over a long period of history and social thought. This is closely related to the changing position of women in the social structure,

power, and class. In modern society, the value of friendship has gradually been aligned with the emotional dilemmas of the post-industrial era, and people have begun to pay attention to its spiritual content, perceptions, and expressions. In the video narratives, friendship has gradually shifted from functionalization to richer self-expression and strong emotional connection. It is worth noting that the difference in gender temperament has created a difference in the expression of friendship between men and women, with emotion, self-expression, and interdependence being seen as characteristics of women in friendship. In recent years, the term "female alliance" has become a buzzword in film and television, and it can be said that "female alliance" is becoming a genre element that is gradually integrated into mainstream narrative formulas.

As a result, female group dramas embodying female friendships have begun to emerge, and by sketching "female group portraits" and using the growth experiences of multiple characters as narrative clues, the advancement of story plots and expression of values often rely on the "mutual achievement" of each female character, such as "My best friend's story", the play breaks the iron rule of "girlfriends must have a tear". The two female protagonists in the drama do not have any quarrels or quarrelsome scenes, they always trust each other and keep each other. The play amplifies the many difficulties faced by women in mainstream society by emphasizing the contradictions associated with male characters such as the Phoenix man and the father's debt. Zhu Suosuo and Jiang Nansun, their friendship generalized the urban emotional drama narrative to create a new symbolic portrait of female friendship.[19]

6. Analysis of the Reasons for the Changes in the Construction of the Female Image in Chinese Mainland TV Series

6.1. Factor of Sociology

In the 1970s, American anthropologist Gayle Rubin first introduced the concept of gender. This concept emphasizes that the understanding of the differences between men and women is primarily sociocultural and that behavioral traits exclusive to male or female groups are established under the sociocultural influence. Biologically, human biological sex differs from social sex in that it is a natural, innate biological marker that does not change during the course of human evolution. Social gender, on the other hand, is an acquired characteristic that changes as a result of the interaction of environmental, socio-political, economic, cultural, and overall human social changes. Feminist research emphasizes that the biological differences inherent in human beings should be minimized, and that attention should be paid to identifying the underlying causes of gender inequality in society while avoiding biological differences to the extent possible.[20]

It reflects that the root cause of gender inequality is the hegemonic male ideology, which rigidly equates biological gender with social gender in the old way of thinking, and brutally believes that women must be dependent on men for their existence. The first task of gender theory is to deconstruct the male discourse, break the political environment dominated by male discourse, deconstruct the unequal status of gender relations, and establish a new social system and equal social relations.[20]

Stereotypes refer to people's habit of understanding a certain type of thing with their own fixed, highly generalized, and simplistic impressions, which usually include their emotional orientation and value judgment of a certain type of thing. According to social psychology research, there are two main ways to form stereotypes: the first is through contact with certain people or groups, and then summarize the characteristics of these people or groups, thus forming a fixed pattern of thinking in the mind; the second is indirectly through other people's descriptions or information transmitted by the media to form stereotypes. In summary, stereotypes become a simple reference standard for people's perception of things, and at the same time, such simplistic and one-sided perceptions limit people's acceptance of new things. In addition to personal stereotypes, there are also a large number of widely accepted stereotypes in social perceptions, and therefore stereotypes play a negative role in controlling society. In terms of mass communication influence, Lippmann argues that mass media not only create a "mimetic environment" but also play a significant role in the formation and maintenance of stereotypes.[21]

In the context of China's reality, the rapid development of natural science and technology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries led to dramatic changes in the social environment. In this context, gender relations in society were redefined and integrated, the old division of gender roles was broken down, and the traditional "you plow the fields, I weave" way of life began to be questioned. A new division of labor began to emerge, the women's movement flourished, and more and more women aspired for liberation, but under the influence of thousands of years of traditional feudalism, women were still groping for their way forward.[21]

For a long time, the traditional Chinese ideology and the restrictions on women in the male-dominated society's values have kept Chinese women from the role of "virtuous wife and mother" in gender performance. The social and cultural status of women is undergoing a tragic fall. Simone de Beauvoir said, "One is not so much 'born' as 'formed' as a woman". Gender role expectations are the demands and expectations of society and others for certain gender identities in a certain social and cultural context. The construction of women's images in TV dramas is, on the one hand, a reflection of women in real life, and on the other hand, a reflection of current social gender expectations for women as a social gender. Therefore, from the 1980s to the present, although the image of women on the screen has changed, from the external dress, speech, and behavior, the way and means to participate in the division of labor in the family and society, the increase of the right to speak, etc., in essence, the ultimate pursuit of female roles must land on love and men, and the female image must always depend on men to reflect the value, and women as "human", they are daughters, mothers, wives, daughters-in-law, sisters, sisters and so on, but they can never be separated from these social roles and just be themselves. No matter how high a woman's success in the workplace is, her value must always be reflected in her contribution to her family. If her marriage fails and her family is unhappy, it seems that in the current social value judgment, life is a failure, and the reason for failure is too much pursuit of her career.

Since TV series have the property of mass media, the image construction of TV series will undoubtedly affect the viewers' perception. Firstly, it affects others' perceptions of women. The limitations of female image shaping in TV dramas lead to stereotypes of women, and the image of women is generally one-sided, single, and even negative. Young female viewers are still immature, and their long-term addiction to "queen" movies and novels will easily lead to misconceptions about themselves and impoverish their spiritual world. In addition, women's long-term immersion in images of "masculine ideology" in the guise of "strong women" will easily paralyze them and lose their ability to criticize gender inequalities, further solidifying gender stereotypes and prejudices, which is not conducive to women's development.

6.2. Factor of Social Reality

With the transformation of social reality, feminism has gradually moved to the center of the social stage by virtue of women's economic status, access to ideological education, and the development of civil rights struggle, and the status of women's discourse has thus been enhanced as never before, which is reflected in the shift of mass media discourse. On the one hand, the development of new media has given women the right to speak out freely. According to the 2020 Weibo User Development Report, 54.6% of young female users are post-90s and post-00s, and women are gradually becoming the main force on some social media platforms. Along with the improvement of women's discourse status, women's issues in social media are more open and diversified.[27]

On the other hand, women have become the main target of mass media content production by virtue of their mass media consumption power, and the gender-dominant discourse in some mass media products has begun to shift from men to women. For example, some scholars point out that contemporary feminist films, TV dramas, and online novels have broken away from the solidified thinking of male ideology, weakened the issue of women's age, and created a more distinct and personalized multi-dimensional image of women.

The fourth survey on the social status of Chinese women shows that in the past decade, women have widely participated in economic and social development, further expanding their employment fields and taking the center stage of China's economic and social development together with men. 43.5% of

those aged 18-64 are employed, while 56.5% are men. Nearly 70% of women are in employment, and the proportion of urban and rural women in employment is 66.3% and 73.2% respectively. In addition, 93.5% of women are concerned about major domestic and international affairs, the proportion of women aged 18-24 who are concerned about major domestic and international affairs is as high as 97.3%, and the proportion of using the Internet as the main way is 91.2%. More than 80% of the decision-makers of major family affairs are jointly discussed by husband and wife, among which 91.1% of the decision-makers of "childbirth" are jointly discussed by husband and wife. In terms of "investment/loan" and "buying/building a house", 89.5% and 90.0% of wives participate in decision-making, 14.8 and 15.6 percentage points higher than in 2010, respectively. In terms of education, the proportion of women with a university education or above was 18.0%, 1.6 percentage points higher than that of men and 3.7 percentage points higher than that of 2010; among them, the proportion of women aged 18-24 was the highest at 50.9%. Among those who received undergraduate education, women accounted for 53.6%, up 5.8 percentage points from 2010.[22]

The above data show that in the past decade, China has further optimized the social environment for promoting gender equality and women's comprehensive development, and the social status of Chinese women has changed significantly; people's recognition of the equal social status of men and women has reached an unprecedented new height, and the social status of women and people's attitudes toward gender equality has changed dramatically.

But on the other hand, is the proliferation of women's films and TV works really a reflection of the awakening of women's consciousness and the improvement of women's status? Liu Wenrong, an associate researcher at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, mentions the influence of capital on women's perspectives. "The current situation is that rather than film and television creation being more respectful of women, the female aesthetic is being consumed. On the surface, it is respecting women's aesthetics, but in fact, it is respecting women's wallets." In her view, the phenomenon can extend to some areas of caution. Because some of the main female perspectives and themes of film and television works or variety shows, some of the women consumed by it will have an unrealistic perception of themselves, that is, that they have some spending power, have the "right to speak", and thus become more difficult to get along with the opposite sex in reality. Therefore, instead of eliminating gender conflicts, consumerism has exacerbated social fragmentation. Therefore, Liu Wenrong said that there may be occasional programs and works that are eye-catching, but it does not mean that the power structure in film and television production has fundamentally changed.[14]

6.3. Factor of the Creators

In Zhang Guangxiao's essay "The Image of Women in the Eyes of Chinese Male Directors: A Comparative Discussion of the Creations of Xie Jin, Ling Zifeng, Bai Shen, and Zhang Yimou", he compares the four male directors to each other. In fact, whether it is weakening, strengthening, or deifying, it does not break away from the male perspective, the female image that fits the male imagination is still constructed according to the hegemony of male discourse. Even Zhang Yimou, who is considered to have "humanized" women, has difficulty breaking free from the deep-rooted constraints of the male perspective. [23]

In "The City is Full of Gold", women become the objects of male admiration. The women of the palace, who are "the beauty of the woman", are carefully portrayed in their make-up and dress. The detailed portrayal of the dressing of the palace ladies and the large number of palace ladies who sway and tremble from one step to the next. A large number of bosoms of the courtesans is a testament to John Berger's "The Way of Seeing".[23]

In The Way of Seeing, John Berger says, "Men watch women, women watch themselves being watched. The woman watches the woman, and the woman watches herself being watched by others." The observer of the female self is the male, and the observed is the female. Therefore, she turns herself into an object, and a very special visual object: the landscape. Zhang Yimou presents women from a male perspective. The viewer is also assumed to be male, both as an image and as an object of the female. [23]

In the film and TV drama market, the producers are mostly men, and the 2018 China Young

Screenwriters Ecological Survey Report shows that 59% of screenwriters are women, but only 17% of directors are women; while 95% of the staff of the top 200 films released at the box office in 1997 were men, and twenty years later, the figure reached 95% again in 2016. According to the De Tavern 2020-2021 TV drama market analysis report, the audience structure of the drama market in 2020, is still dominated by women, accounting for 62%, mainly young women aged 20-39, urban romance, and youth campus drama series are the most popular. [24]

The above data show that, in fact, men occupy an absolutely dominant position in the creation of film and television dramas, but it is difficult for male directors to transcend the narrative limitations of their own male perspective, on the other hand, it is not sure whether female directors who intervene in film shooting as women can resist the infiltration of patriarchal ideology and the control of mainstream discourse, and really put forward critical thinking based on gender position, while as women In the face of the output of patriarchal ideology, can female viewers break free from the constraints of the male perspective and patriarchal ideology and gain self-identity through feminist ideology?

6.4. Factor of Ideology

In China, female emancipation has never been an independent movement like that in the West. Rather, it was often put on the agenda as part of the struggle for national liberation and became a political appendage. After the establishment of New China, although women were legally granted equal rights between men and women and appeared to be liberated, their relative and restricted nature meant that women remained trapped under the suppression of the patriarchal culture. It was only after the opening of the country, the rise of the market economy, and the fierce clash of Eastern and Western cultures that new opportunities and soil were created for the emancipation of women.[25]

Since the beginning of the 20th century, especially after the founding of New China and the reform and opening up, women have not only established their legal equality with men but also relaxed the restrictions on women in many fields than before.

Chinese feminists have tried to build a Chinese feminist theoretical system based on local Chinese experience, which is actually a kind of “feminism with Chinese characteristics” that combines Western feminist discourse resources with local Chinese experience, but there is a long way to go, and the development of feminism with Chinese characteristics has been confined for its own unique historical reasons. [25]

- Chinese feminism emerged from a traditional patriarchal feudal society

For thousands of years, China’s feudal society was a patriarchal society centered on patriarchy, deeply influenced by the ideology of “obey your father at home, obey your husband when you marry, and obey your son when your husband dies”. When a social culture becomes deeply rooted, it becomes a social convention that is taken for granted. In a patriarchal society of more than two thousand years, Chinese women have become prisoners of the spirit of traditional bondage, the objects of derogatory traditional consciousness, and they have no autonomous personality, subject identity, or subject values.

- Chinese feminist paths show a strong dependence and passivity

Historically, the women's liberation movement in the West began in a self-conscious feminist manner, this was manifested in the writings of female writers who expressed a variety of ideas about women's inequality. They saw all women as a whole, a social group oppressed in relation to men, and demanded changes in the group’s communal status. Thus, Western feminism grew out of the struggle for the common good of mankind, pointing to the opposing male group and showing a strong centrifugal force throughout history.

In contrast, the Chinese feminist path has shown a strong dependence and passivity, as the “liberated” and “claimants of rights” alongside the male group, without making the male group the antithesis of resistance, and without becoming a real subject of feminism. Male enlighteners often took the first step and called for women’s liberation to the whole society. In fact, the Chinese women’s liberation movement was led and supported mainly by male democrats and revolutionaries.

In addition, Chinese feminists saw the struggle for marital autonomy as the starting point for the

development of women's rights by breaking away from male patriarchal dependence and gaining personal independence and freedom. However, this also reflects that the struggle of Chinese women was long and arduous.[26]

The pursuit of freedom in marriage was more a rebellion against Chinese feudal rituals than a full awakening of female subject consciousness because women rebelled against the patriarchal social system rather than the entire social order of gender inequality. Therefore, compared to the West, Chinese women's self-consciousness is still being cultivated under the influence of deep-rooted traditional thinking. The necessary condition for awakening female subject consciousness is the development of society and the improvement of women's own quality. The development of society includes not only the improvement of productivity but also the renewal of old concepts and the establishment of new systems. The cultivation of women's self-awareness cannot be achieved overnight but is a long-term social process that depends on the progress and development of social conditions such as politics, economy, and culture, in addition to women's own efforts.[26]

Although the image of women in movies and TV dramas has developed, the construction of women's image is essentially the ideological output of men in power under the patriarchal social system, and the current level of development of Chinese feminist thought is not sufficient to overturn the long-established image of women in society.

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