

Evolving Dynamics: Mother-Daughter Relationships Among Overseas Chinese Women in Film (1980s-2020s)

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Abstract. This research focuses on the continuity and discontinuity of challenges in mother-daughter relationships among overseas Chinese women in film and television over the past four decades (1980s-2020s). Artistic works, to a certain extent, reflect the consciousness of their times and project the subconscious of the era's people. Therefore, using film as a category of artistic work as research material can help researchers more intuitively and comprehensively observe the continuity and discontinuity of challenges faced by overseas Chinese women. This paper draws on 18 key films as primary research materials and conducts a comparative analysis. It can be observed that within the realm of films depicting mother-daughter relationships, the theme of parental control has persisted to the present day, while the younger generation shows more agency. By examining films that portray the experiences of Chinese-American women in their mother-daughter relationships, this research adds depth to the understanding of how these challenges have evolved or remained constant across different eras.

Keywords: Film studies, mother-daughter relationship, overseas Chinese.

1. Introduction

The central focus of this paper is on the continuity and discontinuity of mother-daughter relationship challenges among overseas Chinese women in film and television from the 1980s to the 2020s. In the increasingly complex landscape of social relationships and diversity in the 21st century, the ways in which individuals present their identities and the methods of categorizing different groups have reached unprecedented levels of richness. Similarly, the challenges faced by women have evolved and escalated through their interactions with other groups.

Many studies have focused on the mother-daughter relationships among overseas Chinese women, and the portrayal of them in films serves as a significant cultural and sociological lens through which to understand the complexities and dynamics of diasporic experiences [1-4].

However, existing literature has predominantly conducted in-depth analyses of individual cases rather than providing a comprehensive overview. Thus, this research takes a longitudinal approach, analyzing relevant films depicting overseas Chinese women over the past 40 years. By observing the specific challenges portrayed by these characters on screen, it aims to identify which issues have endured and which have evolved.

Methodologically, this paper draws on 18 key films as primary research materials and conducts comparative analysis. It contrasts the similarities and differences in mother-daughter relationship challenges across these various cases. The paper mutually supplements and comments on each perspective and viewpoint, ultimately structuring its main sections based on a chronological comparison of challenges depicted in the films.

2. Persistent Challenges in Mother-Daughter Relationships

2.1. Emphasis on Family Value

In the early 2000s, as societal mindsets began to open up, a new set of issues emerged in the complex landscape of mother-daughter relationships among overseas Asian women. In 2004, the Toronto Film Festival released a film called *Saving Face*, which tells the story of an Asian mother and daughter living in the United States. The mother finds herself pregnant amidst chaos, while the daughter falls in love with another girl; both mother and daughter have their own thoughts, and within this milieu, a series of narratives unfold.

One primary focal point is the persistent challenge of cultural continuity. This film also illustrates a very classic problem that has been depicted in previous cinematic and television works. Asian families often adhere to ingrained notions of family, wherein women are expected to marry promptly and take care of their husbands and children. At best, they can marry a so-called lover, and then they can have a complete life. A sardonic touch emerges towards the movie's conclusion when Vivian, the daughter, and her partner Wei become a couple, and Vivian's mother says, "At least she married a doctor." This irony arises from the fact that Wei is a doctor, and Asian mothers always think that women should marry individuals like teachers or doctors. They believe that having such a son-in-law will not only bring them fame but also represent optimal matches for their daughters. The film's other heroine, Xiao Wei's mother, subscribes to this notion, introducing her daughter to a slew of accomplished suitors. However, her daughter's reluctance juxtaposed with parental aspirations unveils one of the most typical mother-daughter relationship dilemmas.

2.2. Involvement in Private Issues

This thematic thread is not unique to this film; it permeates the entire film and television industry whenever Asian mother-daughter dynamics are explored. From this, it can be concluded that the marriage issue is still the typical issue within the mother-daughter relationship debate. A second area of focus pertains to the so-called "new problem": the dispute arising from different sexual orientations. In the movie, Vivian is afraid to tell her mother that she is a lesbian and has clandestinely become involved with a girlfriend. This is termed a "new problem" because previous film and television works primarily showcased daughters resisting parental arrangements due to personal dissatisfaction. This film, in contrast, focuses on the issue of different sexual orientations. This also means that in the early 21st century, there is a new change in the dilemma of mother-daughter relationships among overseas Asian women. Instead of continuing the conflict caused by arranged marriage in 21st-century films, this film delves into the topic from the perspective of sexual identity.

Another intriguing aspect emerges when Wei tells her friend, "In China, it is necessary to take care of your mother, or you will be judged." This statement arises from Wei's father expelling her mother from their home and relocating to Wei's house during her pregnancy. The mother's interference with her private life and different habits puts the mother-daughter relationship in a precarious situation. This situation is also a point of continuity. In Asian families, mothers might exert excessive control during their children's formative years, prompting daughters to leave their parents' control. The generational gap causes different living habits, often becoming a flashpoint for conflict.

In addition, a noteworthy departure from the past is the evolving attitude of mothers. Most of the earlier film and television works are based on daughters' compromise to achieve reconciliation as the ending. However, in this film, the mother and daughter finally reach a dramatic reconciliation; the mother is no longer a dominating figure, while the daughter transcends the role of a mere follower. Instead, both engage in equal dialogues, signaling a new narrative trajectory.

3. Intertwined Fates

3.1. Symbiotic Fantasy

In ancient Greek mythology, the tale of Princess Electra is well-known. Her mother, along with her lover, murdered her father, which led to Electra's determination to avenge her father's murder, ultimately encouraging her brother to kill her mother. Carl Jung termed this the Electra Complex, the female counterpart of the Oedipus Complex, while Iggy Freud believed that the Oedipus Complex stemmed from a daughter's "fear of being swallowed up by the authoritative mother figure and her extreme longing for her mother's love and compassion" [5,6]. From birth, daughters embark on same-sex object relations, specifically, the mother-daughter relationship, in the absence of prominent gender differences during upbringing. This obscures the initial stimulus for independence [6,7]. Within such a mental model, this unique mother-daughter interaction fosters mutual identification, leading to emotional closeness that is challenging to outgrow. Iggy Freud termed this dependent, mutually affecting relationship a "symbiotic fantasy" [6]. For both mother and daughter, the "symbiotic fantasy" is dichotomous. The emotional signs are never sufficient or satisfactory. It is a repressed interaction that occurs more frequently between mother and daughter than between mother and son. This "symbiotic fantasy" is commonly portrayed in films depicting mother-daughter relationships, where "it is painful to rely on one person alone to meet all of one's emotional needs" [6]. The "symbiotic fantasy" is interspersed with indescribable love and hate. As Chizuko Ueno puts it, a "mother's disappointment is mixed with a sense of powerlessness that she cannot change the status. The mother curses her own life, and at the same time imposes the same life on her daughter, causing her to hate her" [8]. Mothers' dissatisfaction with their own situations and the sacrifices they have made, coupled with their hopes that their daughters will not face the same misfortunes as the women of old China, lead them to invest their hopes in their children, attempting to make amends through them. The mother-daughter relationship in the work appears to be a struggle between freedom and authority. The mother symbolizes authority and strives to mold her daughter according to her own ideals, rejecting her independence. The daughter, conversely, embodies freedom and endeavors to deny her mother's authority and break free from her influence.

3.2. Continuing War

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Wu Suyuan transforms her indebtedness to her twins in China into hope and nurturing for her daughter, June. She has been conducting a "genius training program" for June, and when June resists, she forcefully declares, "There are only two kinds of daughters: those who obey their mother's orders and those who do what they want, but this house only has room for the obedient ones." Additionally, daughters are fearful of their mother's authority and yearn for her affection. In her first marriage, Willy married a Chinese man for her mother's happiness and satisfaction. This time, she desires to be brave and find her own happiness, but her mother's image looms large in her mind. The night she brings her boyfriend home for dinner, Willy continuously observes her mother's expression. She feels relief when her mother smiles, but if her mother is not pleased, she will not even dare mention marriage. The mother seeks to intervene in her daughter's life and upbringing. She endeavors to bind her fate to that of her daughter, who fears her mother's authority but simultaneously craves her love. The complexity of the relationship between mother and daughter is a "symbiotic fantasy," where the mother gives love to her child on the condition that the child must yield to her expectations. "Generations of miserable mothers have been oppressed and twisted, and then they have oppressed, twisted, and killed their daughters. Daughters, wives, mothers, mothers-in-law, reincarnate and evolve week after week in the female community" [9,10]. Daughters' perceptions will be subconsciously influenced in such an environment. Daughters do not want to be their mother's shadow, but mother and daughter are ultimately inseparable. Mother and daughter are alike, and daughters always have their mother's shadow within them.

4. Changes in Mother-Daughter Relationships

4.1. Changing Dynamics

Twenty years later, things have changed again. The movie *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, released in 2022, continues to address similar problems shown in previous films about the living conditions of overseas Chinese women and the theme of feminism. The main focus is still on the relationship between mothers and daughters, serving as a starting point for the narrative. For example, there's the “symbiotic fantasy” between mother and daughter, reminiscent of its appearance in *The Joy Luck Club*, as well as the struggle between freedom and authority, the adherence to ingrained notions of family, and the dissatisfaction stemming from different sexual orientations, as seen in *Saving Face*. However, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* takes a step forward.

4.2. Deeper Philosophical Explorations in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

Firstly, from the perspective of the character set, the female protagonist in this film is no longer from a family of middle-class elite intellectuals in society as seen in *The Joy Luck Club* or *Saving Face*. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* shows the living dilemma and narrative of a Chinese-American woman closer to the working class. Therefore, the plot's development and the motives for changes in the characters' psychological state differ.

Secondly, considering the film's central point of exploration, it does not stop at discussing issues such as rebellion against the original family and the entanglement between mother and daughter. It delves into a deeper discussion about the fundamental logic and reasons behind decisions such as choosing a career to honor the family and marry at an appropriate age. The underlying logic is the meaning of life. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* clearly points out that each choice, whether it's the university one attends, the career one pursues, or the partner one selects, defines the meaning of life. These choices shape the trajectory of life and its meaning. This freedom of choice comes from human free will, although freedom is not boundless.

Every encounter in one's life will have a ripple-like effect on the lives of others. The notion that “other is hell” becomes complex. When two people meet, they are objects to each other, and out of the nature of the “selfishness” of human nature along with free will, the interactions between subject and object often manifest in irrationalities. The inherent contradiction and the challenge of reconciliation are almost inevitable, becoming the root cause of all suffering.

Elders in families force the younger generation to choose stable and decent jobs such as doctors, lawyers, and accountants. Finding an equally decent marriage partner at the societal “marriageable age” is considered by the public a mark of individual completeness and elevation. This repression is often driven by the “well-meaning” intentions of others. Life is endless, irreconcilable, and inevitable. However, if one chooses to remain inert like a stone after realizing this, they might fall into an existential crisis of nothingness as shown by the daughter in the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*.

5. Summary

Based on the series of studies presented above, this paper has observed that in films depicting mother-daughter relationships, family values and marriage issues continue to be main themes, while other aspects like sexual identity and self-choice are also included. In the context of having experienced three waves of feminist movements and with an increasing number of feminist films, viewers can use this research as a foundation for future studies.

While this paper focuses on films primarily set in the United States due to practical considerations like film production and discourse, future research could conduct cross-sectional comparisons between challenges faced by women in China and the broader category of “overseas Chinese women.” Similarly, comparisons could be made between the challenges faced by Chinese women in different parts of the world and those experienced by Chinese women in the United States.

Moreover, future researchers could delve into comparing the challenges of overseas women as depicted in films with the real-life challenges faced by overseas Chinese women. Furthermore, comparisons could be made between the challenges portrayed in films and those presented in other forms of artistic media.

In an era marked by evolving feminist perspectives and an increasing awareness of diversity and representation, this research provides a stepping stone for further exploration into the complexities of overseas Chinese women's experiences, both on and off the screen.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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