

# Representation, Inter-construction, Production: Feminist Theory and Practice in Chinese Urban Films

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**Abstract.** As a social trend of thought, feminism can be directly expressed through social movements, and it can also be appropriately spread through the media through art. As a theory and practice, feminism has an intriguing relationship with art, media and reality. This paper examines the theory and practice of feminism in film, and discusses the dimensions of screen space, media space, and real space, including the emergence of female consciousness, the construction of gender politics, and the new pattern of female discourse space, that is, to examine representation, mutual construction and production status.

**Keywords:** feminism; urban film; gender politics.

## 1. Introduction

As a social trend of thought, feminism is a special epistemology, that is, it is not only about the way half of the human beings perceive and understand the world, but also will directly or indirectly affect social reality practically. Also it should be noted that the feminist theory and practice mentioned in this article is not a simple binary distinction between gender studies (theory) and feminist movement (practice), but rather takes consciousness - reality as the philosophical logic of genealogy. As a theory and practice of feminism, what are the representations of reality in urban films? With the advancement of technology, what new changes have taken place in the methods of transmission? How does feminism affect social reality under the new media form?

## 2. Feminism and urban cinemas in Chinese

As a young mass, the film is an important medium for women to try to break the gender shackles in the cultural field. As early as the 1930s, female actors represented by Ruan Lingyu and Li Lili appeared in a number of films, represented by "Goddess" (1934) and "New Woman" (1935). Women have entered the historical stage of Chinese film with the image of "humiliated" and "self-sacrifice". In the films from 1949 to 1966, they paid attention to female laborers, and many films reflected women as part of the socialist revolution, showing the picture of women's production and life in the early days of socialism. However, although the women on the screen during this period turned to participate in the social space from the family space, the gender issue was almost completely obscured by the class issue, and the gender difference was weakened. Along with the urbanization process and the awakening of women's self-identification, urban films with the theme of China's urbanization process have become a creative source for Chinese films. Since 1993, the rapid expansion and prosperity of popular culture would have greatly invaded the daily life of the people's society. The number of TV sets and movie theaters has gradually increased, and the concept of "culture" has penetrated into "all elements of life" of people. Therefore, the feminist films we discuss only refer to films directed by female directors or screenwriters, with women as the main characters or perspectives, and with female consciousness.

### **3. Gender politics in the body, culture, and the family**

#### **3.1. Body and gender politics**

Influenced by the traditional concept of the coexistence of beauty and crime, the "victim guilt theory" in modern society has become people's collective unconscious. The movie "Carnival" (director/screenwriter Wen Yan, 2017) is, in a sense, a powerful refutation of the "victim guilt theory". Although the film depicts underage girls, it shows the current state of women's existence. When women are hurt, they initially see it as a simple accident and ignore it in a self-interested manner. But when these injuries have a certain extent, women begin to reflect on themselves, and in the process of mutual support, women's "self" consciousness would slowly awaken, starting the construction of women's "self" dignity, and the redemption of "self" destiny.

Of course, when vulnerable groups are violently violated, the perpetrator is by no means a single person, but the entire society. Film production and secondary Internet dissemination have aroused widespread public attention and moral questions on hot topics. Many women shouted the slogan "My body is my master" on social media to counter the long-standing patriarchal discourse. On April 30, 2020, Supreme People's Procuratorate in China issued the "Opinions on Strengthening the Procuratorial Work of Minors in the New Era" to accelerate the protection and legislative work for minors (especially female minors).

#### **3.2. Gender politics in culture**

The discipline of women in ancient Chinese society was established under the framework of a "moral politics", and the power structure always appeared and operated in the form of a mechanism of moral. The film "Infinite Movement" (director Ning Ying, 2005) is a film with female consciousness in a certain sense by creating four female images that are different from previous films. And the film tells the story of four women who got together on New Year's Eve because of Niuniu's husband's derailment, and had a female discourse through memories and inner monologues to show the true feelings of women. In a patriarchal society, women have no right to speak, and they can only express their opinions and emotions through memories and inner monologues. The four female characters in the film are different from the previous characters of female, and they are not sexy stunners in the commodity market and mass media. Personally, they smoke, swear, and have a chaotic private life, and they discuss "sex" recklessly. The four women linked up the endless suppressed desires, and finally had the cultural reflection of contemporary women with the gesture of "exiting collectively".

#### **3.3. Family and gender politics**

In the process of constructing subjectivity from attachment to independence, from others to self, women in modern society will almost inevitably encounter another predicament: the contradiction between housework (including childbirth) and workplace work. It is also the main source of the pressure on modern women. The film named I'm gonna find you (screenwriter Qin Haiyan, 2018) criticizes men to a certain extent from a feminist perspective, showing women's strong resistance to injustice and their firm opposition to injustice. The film uses three images of mothers with different social status, different living environments and different occupations to show the various contradictions between women and the current society, family, and interpersonal relationships around them.

Popular discourse about "motherhood" is a newly emerging gender issue. Since 2016, China has implemented the "universal two-child" policy. That's why the discourses of women's individual experiences, such as whether to have a child or not, why to have a child, who will be in charge after the child is born, are constantly stacked and gathered, forming a collective "complaint" of motherhood against fatherhood, and also prompting women to re-examine the concept of reproductive rights. In the six years from the pilot implementation of the two-child policy to the full liberalization of the second-child policy, the birth rate in China has not increased significantly. The data also shows that

the willingness of both husband and wife to have a second child in a separate family has not improved significantly, which is not unrelated to the real presentation of women's real problems in the media and the refocusing and rediscussion of the audience.

## **4. Feminist practice in the era of media convergence**

### **4.1. Female discourse space inside and outside the screen**

For a long time, women's individual experiences based on gender differences have been covered by male-dominated discourse, and women's right to speak about their inner emotions and desires has been erased. Feminism strives to break the meta-discourse under the patriarchal-centered order and establish new discourse rules. "Send Me to the Sky" (director Teng Congcong, 2019) tries to break through the binary framework of gender opposition by deconstructing the gender discourse system. The film portrays the heroine Sheng Nan as a Mulan-like character, and begins the search in a de-feminine way. Because of her ovarian cancer, she hopes to finally experience the pleasure of eroticism, and this is the main purpose and core desire of the character's actions throughout the film.

In the second dissemination of the video website, the film participated in nearly 50,000 discussions in short reviews. Among them, "please give them a little more kindness", "the women who act as props in domestic movies, finally speak for themselves" and so on. The discussion title with an obvious female stance not only interprets the characters in the film, but also reflects the strong gender awareness of the audience.

### **4.2. Feminism as productive forces and productive relations**

In recent years, women are no longer the objects displayed on the film screen, nor are they just creators of film texts, but have become the production subjects of the film industry. Since 2002, as a representation of reality, women's employment, workplace, fertility and other issues on the screen have been placed in social reality and put forward new demands. Xu Jinglei in "Du Lala's Promotion", in addition to shaping the "female power" Du Lala's white-collar image, also participated in the production and circulation of the film industry. Li Yu appeared as a commercial film director to open the narrative unit of "female desire". His works "Guanyin Mountain", "Second Exposure" and "Everything Grows" won the box office of 70 million, 110 million and 150 million respectively. The results have become the word-of-mouth film of the year.

Female discourse in the three-dimensional space of screen, media and reality not only strengthens the concept of gender equality, but also stimulates female consumption in economic life. Driven by the power of "her economy", art salons and film exhibitions related to women's issues have gradually increased, and feminism has expanded its territory and scope in the giant container of the city, recreating people's reality through physical or virtual space forms life.

## **5. Conclusion**

Feminism in Chinese urban films presents three modes of representation, mutual construction and production in screen space, media space and real space respectively, which is the self-evidence of the unity of feminist theory and practice. Public opinions are spread and fermented through new media, and can form a public opinion field with certain influence in a short period of time. However, the flow of data "comes fast and goes fast", and the art of cinema shows its power at this time. Feminist cinema is often not transcendental, but it is a footnote of the moment, a space with ongoing vitality.

In addition, in recent years, film and television works have scrambled to create the image of many "big heroines", and we should maintain a cautious attitude in this regard. Because many film and television dramas that promote so-called feminism cannot pass the Bechdel Test, and the so-called "feminism" fictionalized by film and television works is likely to counteract female consciousness and eventually fall into the stereotype of male-centeredness.

Finally, we should also remain rational in the face of cyberspace. The coupling of mass media and film and television culture gives value to feminist practice and dissemination, but at the same time it is also very easy to conspire with the commodity economy, making women seem independent and independent, but in fact standing on the opposite side of female consciousness: an active self-objectification, that is, through material accumulation, continuing to package yourself beautifully to gain subjectivity and satisfaction, and become the "other" of capital. Only when the outline of "feminine reality" is drawn more clearly, can one better participate in the development process of "human coexistence".

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