



Comparative Study of Narrative Phenomena in Chinese and American Chick Flicks

Nuojin Tang*

College of Liberal Arts, Southwest University, Chongqing, China

*Corresponding author: 2366798591@qq.com

Abstract. In recent years, the academic community has primarily engaged in in-depth analysis and comparative interpretations of narrative techniques and female psychological aspects in Chinese and American chick flicks, a specific genre within the realm of cinema. This exploration delves into the resurgence of traditional elements and the subversion of modern elements. Understanding individual self-realization within this cyclical exploration process, as well as the diverse representations of modernist awakening in film imagery across different societal contexts, requires an analytical perspective that combines narratology and semiotics to explore the underlying causes and historical origins behind different visual representations. Comparative analysis of Chinese and American chick flicks reveals both commonalities and distinct societal and temporal characteristics in terms of stylistic approaches, aesthetic viewpoints, and thematic choices. This comparison facilitates China's adoption of mature production experiences and cultural traits from the United States, injecting richer cultural connotations into chick flicks and the entire genre of cinema.

Keywords: Localization Observation; Socio-Cultural; Feminism; Narrative Phenomena; Cultural Comparison

1 Introduction

Hollywood's "chick flicks" portray the lives and emotional transformations of urban young women, blending multiple elements to attract audiences with a bright tone and humorous plot, achieving high box office returns with low budgets. Chinese "chick flicks" mimic the American genre but incorporate Chinese socio-cultural characteristics. The liberation of women and social modernization drive the transformation of female roles and identities, expressing aspirations for voice and agency. Given that "chick flicks" in mainland China are still in the early stages of development, academic research on them remains limited. Most domestic studies in academia focus on narrative analysis or superficial descriptions, capturing the social and cultural implications reflected in "chick flicks" but lacking in-depth sociological analysis. Therefore, this study aims to delve deeper into the rich connotations and social values of "chick flicks." The similarities and differences in narrative phenomena between Chinese and American "chick flicks" reflect the respective countries' differences in socio-cultural background, values,

© The Author(s) 2024

D. Rad et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2024 5th International Conference on Mental Health, Education and Human Development (MHEHD 2024)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 857, https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-271-2_43

and aesthetic orientation, providing more innovation and possibilities for film production in both countries. Through comparative research, a better understanding and appreciation of the unique charm of films from both countries can be gained, offering valuable insights for the development of Chinese "chick flicks."

2 Narrative Presentation and Psychological Contrast of Chinese and American Chick Flicks

The proliferation of American chick flicks has not only increased in number but also diversified in themes, akin to a refreshing sea breeze, taking root and sprouting in the Chinese film market. In the blink of an eye, Chinese-style "chick flicks" have also undergone a magnificent transformation, transitioning from imitation to a new era of "localization." The vibrant social and cultural landscapes of both countries, coupled with the diverse nature of their film industries, contribute to the unique charm of "chick flicks," each showcasing its own distinct allure.

2.1 Retrospection: Exploring the Deep-rooted Traditional Virtues of Women

In-depth studies by Massa Woolfstein and Nathan Lees on Hollywood films reveal, "Hollywood films often first address appearances in a mocking manner during their presentation. As a form of fictional drama, films showcase the suppressed desires of male and female protagonists. However, these characters ultimately do not suffer punishment due to their desires, as their behavior is ultimately revealed to be misunderstood false appearances." [1] "Chick flicks" fundamentally embody kindness and innocence; they only portray a "bad girl" image as a protective color to conceal their inner beauty. Their growth process is driven by both internal forces, such as innate innocence and ambition, and external factors, such as changes in life circumstances. This process is not a dramatic transformation but rather a return to their true selves at the right moment. Through such growth, the qualities exhibited by "chick flicks" align highly with global expectations of feminine virtues: they are kind, hardworking, independent, ambitious, sincere, and empathetic. This post-growth "chick" image actually meets the expectations of traditional "good girls" for men.

Vivian in "Pretty Woman" firmly refuses to be a kept woman and chooses to continue her education, pursuing an academic path. The protagonist of "Breakfast at Tiffany's" reevaluates her life values and abandons the idea of marrying into wealth. "The Wild Child" follows Miss Man through growth and transformation, becoming a sensible, obedient, and kind-hearted girl. In "Sleepless in Seattle," the protagonist, after giving up a luxurious lifestyle, establishes a gourmet website through her own efforts and takes on the responsibility of raising her son alone. In "The Devil Wears Prada," Andy, after delving into the fashion world, discovers its underlying filth and hypocrisy. Therefore, she firmly follows her inner moral code and gives up her originally bright future.

2.2 Breaking: Triggering Emotional Resonance with National New Charms

In shaping female characters, European and American films strive to avoid the monotony of roles, thus giving characters more freshness and novelty. In these films, the professional backgrounds of female protagonists are diverse, including lawyers, editors, white-collar workers, and actresses, among others. In contrast, similar Chinese films still seem limited in character development, primarily focusing on roles such as fashion magazine editors and white-collar workers. In terms of plot presentation, European and American films emphasize the ups and downs of the plot and the arrangement of coincidences, making the story more engaging. At the same time, multiple characters often appear in the films, with complex emotional relationships intertwining multiple storylines, adding much color to the story. This narrative approach helps to create more three-dimensional and realistic character images.

In comparison, Chinese "chick flicks" mainly focus on telling the love stories of female characters, with relatively simple plots and flat narratives. In terms of character development, these films often lack diversity, and their narrative styles are relatively outdated, easily falling into clichés. Therefore, there is still much room for improvement in how Chinese films shape female characters and tell stories, requiring efforts toward deeper and more profound directions.

Taking the movie "Sex and the City" as an example, the four female characters in the film have distinct personalities, each with their own characteristics, both dominant and supportive, complementing each other, adding color to the character shaping. This provides valuable reference and inspiration for the future development of Chinese films. American women showcase their unique feminine charm with their sexy and seductive image. Chinese women, on the other hand, stand out among female groups with their unique image of intellectual, elegant, and tasteful "literary youth," deeply loved by the audience. The movie "Love is Not Blind," with its "fresh and clean" style, leads fashion trends, with a wide audience including students and urban white-collar workers. In their limited economic conditions, they pursue fashion, elegance, and taste, showing complex and diverse attitudes toward material wealth. Huang Xiaoxian, as a character, is not just an ordinary urban white-collar worker but also a Chinese female image full of personality, literary temperament, and unique charm.

3 Cultural Analysis of Female Subjectivity in Chinese and American Chick Flicks

Film, as an art form, profoundly reflects various aspects of social life. Due to differences in social and cultural backgrounds among different countries, "chick flicks" exhibit their own unique textual characteristics in terms of topics, presentation styles, and aesthetic standards. By comparing the texts of American "chick flicks," we can explore the historical and cultural factors behind these similarities and differences, analyze the social and cultural psychology of the masses, and further reveal the unique value of "chick flicks" in society.

3.1 The Social Roots and Historical Background of Female Consciousness Awakening

In the history of the feminist movement in the United States, there have been two significant waves, which occurred during the mid-19th century to the early 20th century in the struggle for rights and in the first half of the 19th century in the second wave of women's liberation movements. It is worth noting that the rise of these two movements is closely related to the social background of the mid-1960s, when women, like slaves, were not fully recognized under the law. In 1848, the first feminist convention was held at Seneca Falls, New York, initiated by women's movement leaders Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.[2]

Since the 1960s, under the promotion of the civil rights movement and new ideological trends, the second wave of the women's movement has gradually demonstrated profound and extensive social influence. Subsequently, conferences such as the 1977 International Women's Conference injected new vitality into the women's movement, further expanding its influence. These significant events not only highlight the important position of the women's movement in social development but also reflect the unremitting pursuit and firm promotion of gender equality by all sectors of society.[3]

The liberation of women in China did not originate from active advocacy by feminists but rather as a natural result of social change. Since the initiation of market-oriented economic reforms in 1978, the country has gradually guided enterprises to implement autonomy in operation, appointment systems, and contract systems, bringing profound impacts on labor protection, social welfare, and women's treatment. Against this background, the issue of women's employment gradually became prominent, with an increase in the number of surplus female workers and female workers facing pay cuts, unemployment, and even returning to their hometowns.

In the economic transition stage of the 1990s, the emergence of the "layoff tide" significantly impacted the female employment market. Even under the dawn of the new century, social progress has broadened the paths and possibilities for women's career choices, but women still generally bear the heavy pressure of discrimination in the workplace. The awakening of female self-consciousness not only profoundly reflects the promotion of social environment and ideological trends on the women's liberation movement but also is the inevitable result of human society moving towards modernization.

3.2 The Internal Focus Narrative of Female Subjectivity

Renowned feminist enlightenment figure Betty Friedan, in her widely disseminated work "The Feminine Mystique," deeply analyzed the excessive worship of the "happy housewife" myth in American society. This worship inadvertently sets stereotyped impressions for women, leading to the deprivation of their equal competitive rights in the workplace, reflecting the suppression of women's needs by a male-dominated society.

In the "chick flicks" of both China and the United States, this phenomenon is vividly depicted. Women who are too focused on work and find it difficult to balance family life are labeled as "career women" who are "neglecting their duties." Their success in

their careers is not recognized by society but instead becomes the target of attack. Taking Miranda in "The Devil Wears Prada" as an example, she became the focus of media attention due to her divorce and was accused of being a domineering feminist. Similarly, in Chinese "chick flicks" such as "Go Lala Go!" and "The Cosmetic Diary," similar situations are portrayed. Career women are too busy with work to take care of household chores, and their efforts are not properly valued.

In the American film "The Devil Wears Prada," the protagonist undergoes a profound transformation, which is not limited to the shaping of external images but is a comprehensive improvement in internal spirit and external performance. Similarly, in the Chinese film "Go Lala Go!" the female protagonist Lala successfully transforms her previous image of a housewife in the workplace. Through clothing displays and fashion week events in the film, she successfully creates an image of a dynamic and positive modern woman, leading social trends and highlighting the competence and decisiveness of modern women in the workplace. This fully proves that in the new era, women pay more attention to the realization and pursuit of their own values.

4 Chinese and American Chick Flicks in the Context of Modernity

The evolution of time and societal changes have jointly led to the rise of chick flicks. Against the backdrop of traditional societal norms, chick flicks' special focus on female characters holds profound significance. The popularity of such films is not merely a cinematic phenomenon but a microcosm of current Chinese societal and cultural changes and collective psychological adjustments.

4.1 Cultural Evolution Reshaped by Social Transformation

Since the initiation of reforms in 1978, Chinese society and culture have undergone significant changes, reflecting profound transformations in societal values. The introduction of a market economy led Chinese people to discard previous ascetic and egalitarian ideas, and the accumulation of wealth sparked people's interest in economics. The rise of consumer and commodity societies nurtured economic thinking among the populace, evaluating behaviors based on costs and benefits. By the 1980s, social discourse gradually shifted from grand narratives to individual perspectives, leading to the gradual replacement of personal responsibility for national society with the notion of "having money means having everything."

For the United States, Protestant ethics to some extent shaped Americans' materialistic attitudes. They prioritize practical value over empty talk, valuing practical actions over lofty ideals. This emphasis on material interests and utility evolved into American indigenous philosophy and pragmatism. Pragmatism pursues practical results as its goal, reflected in the success-oriented concepts propagated by American society, tinged with utilitarianism. In American culture, individual struggle and the spirit of freedom are revered, providing equal opportunities for personal development.

In chick flicks, female protagonists typically have clear, practical expectations and gain substantive benefits after overcoming difficulties, whether it's achieving success, finding love, or achieving spiritual satisfaction. In this process, they often need help from others or seize opportunities. The immense variability in American society has led Americans to place greater faith in the importance of opportunities, with the "Cinderella" plotline frequently seen in films. Americans yearn to be saved and believe that salvation can change their destiny. Unlike the spiritual anxiety of Chinese-style "chick flicks," American-style "chick flicks" are filled with radical individualism and the spirit of struggle, also pursuing material and spiritual satisfaction.

4.2 Symbolic Consumption in Postmodernism

Baudrillard pointed out that postmodern society is a consumer society deeply surrounded by materialism, where consumer culture plays a leading role. With the transition from modern to postmodern society, production methods have shifted from large-scale, assembly-line "Fordism" to technological and market-oriented "post-Fordism." This transition has propelled the continued expansion and accumulation of commodity production, providing a solid material foundation for consumer society.

In modern society, consumers mainly focus on the utility value of goods, satisfying their life needs by consuming products. However, in postmodern consumer culture, the term "consumption" represents the symbolic meaning behind goods. Luxury or limited-edition items become symbols and signs for the wealthy. Therefore, compared to material consumption in modern society, consumers in postmodern society tend to prefer symbolic consumption.[4]

Bourdieu pointed out that a class can be defined by its existence and perception, reflected not only in its position in production relations but also in its consumption behavior. In today's society, the leisurely and wealthy class portrayed in chick flicks is actually an imaginative depiction of the emerging middle class. [5]This class has generally received a high level of cultural education, possesses relatively high incomes and consumption levels, thus becoming a core force in consumer society.

From a broader perspective, the phenomenon behind chick flicks reflects the close integration of fashion consumption with the capital market. It mainly targets urban white-collar workers and the new middle class, constructing a surreal "daydream" world through imitation and imagination of the real world. This phenomenon embodies the collusion and resonance between mass media and consumer popular culture.[6]

5 Conclusion

Chick flicks, a film genre originating from the United States, have gained widespread popularity worldwide due to their distinct characteristics. As a subgenre of romantic films, they provide visual feasts for audiences through vivid portrayals of female characters, exquisite costume and set designs, and heartwarming storylines. Against the backdrop of the current Chinese film market facing the impact of American block-

busters, chick flicks offer a unique perspective and inspiration for the rise of the Chinese film industry. Films, as mirrors of social life, deeply reflect the rhythm of the times and the evolution of society. Among them, chick flicks, with their keen insight, closely follow popular social issues, exhibiting unique and distinct socio-cultural characteristics, and embodying the spirit of women's resistance to power struggles.

Although chick flicks may be considered fast-food cinema in terms of film studies, their popularity is closely linked to the evolution of social culture. By satisfying the audience's psychological need for "healing," they achieve self-continuation and development. A successful chick flick not only meets the expectations of some viewers but also reveals and addresses social conflicts. Therefore, works represented by chick flicks, while depicting social conflicts, also reflect societal characteristics. By addressing issues to heal the audience's emotional wounds, they provide psychological impacts, promoting the alleviation of social conflicts through catharsis and consolation.

References

1. (Australia) Author: Matt White; Translated by Wu Jing, He Jianping, Liu Hui. *The Development History of Hollywood Films and the American Film Industry*. [M]. Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 2011. Page 59.
2. Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. In *Foreign Film Theory Selected Works* by Li Ji and Yang Yuanying. Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore, 2006.
3. Chen Yu, *Several Issues in the Study of Chinese Genre Films*. In *Journal of Zhejiang Media College*, 2010, Issue 5.
4. Wang Houxiang. *Research on Postmodern Consumer Culture Theory*. [D]. Lanzhou: Lanzhou University.
5. Liu Xin. *Class Habits and Taste: Bourdieu's Class Theory*. In *Sociology Observation*, 2003 (6).
6. Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Translated by Yang Xiangrong. Haikou: Nanhai Publishing Company, 2014.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

