Examine Hong Kong's Phallocentric Film Genres Negotiated the Role of Female Characters

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Abstract. In the Chinese culture, which has long been dominated by Confucianism (a philosophical system that emphasises social harmony and hierarchical order), women have long faced oppression by men. Since society is rapidly evolving, more women strive for independence and autonomy, hoping to escape male domination. In this regard, feminism gradually developed (Rowbotham, 2013). Previously, films from Hong Kong were male-centred and contained themes related to police work versus criminal activity, where the females tended to be romantic companions with a passive role or marginalisation. However, with the evolution of society and the upgrade of women's status, women began to make female-inspired movies from their perspectives, showing how they looked at things. Notably, after the twentieth century, when global society fell into instability and change, feminism gained vast influence, producing countless cultural products like films on feminists. In this essay, I will analyse how female characters are portrayed in Hong Kong's phallocentric film genre. Firstly, I will analyse the theory of the male gaze to analyse the traditional portrayal of female characters in male films using typical Hong Kong police films. Then, I will analyse the characteristics of female characters in the works of male directors and female characters in the works of female directors, respectively. Finally, I will compare the images of female characters from different gendered directors' perspectives to study the influence of gender perspectives on the portrayal of female characters in Hong Kong films.

Keywords: Film; plot analysis; female characters; male characters; film genres

1   INTRODUCTION

The image of women has played an important role in the history of Chinese film and television art, and has undergone a remarkable evolution with the change of time, which is not only a shift in artistic expression, but also a vivid mapping of the evolution of society and culture and the change of women's status [1]. In the early days of cinema, we see women portrayed as traditional and subservient to a male-dominated society, with their destiny and choices often limited by established social frameworks and cultural perceptions [2]. However, with the gradual opening up of society and deeper

cultural changes, women's images in movies and TV shows have begun to take on a richer and more diverse appearance.

The term feminism may give the impression that it is a separate ideology, but in fact there are many schools of feminism. Due to historical backgrounds, the legal status of women in certain countries, and other factors, feminism has taken different routes to achieve different goals. As a result, there are various schools of feminism.

One of these schools of thought is radical feminism, which believes that patriarchy is the root cause of society's most serious problems. This school of feminism was popular in the second wave of feminism, although it is not as prominent today. However, there are still many people who equate the term 'feminism' exclusively with the ideas put forth by radical feminism. Some feel that the traditional radical feminist ideology, which prioritises male oppression of women, and the idea that there is a universal concept of 'femininity', is too comprehensive, and that the experience of 'femininity' for women in other countries is definitely not the same as that of women in the West. The experience of 'femininity' for women in other countries will never be the same as it is for women in the West. Women in the West may feel that gender oppression is at the root of the oppression they face, but women in other parts of the world may find that their oppression comes from their race or economic status rather than their femininity.

The image of women in modern cinema is no longer limited to the portrayal of external social roles, but more concerned with inner self-knowledge and self-worth, and modern women have more in-depth thinking about personal identity, free will and life choices. In the film, the exploration and growth of female characters is not only a personal story, but also a deep reflection of the changing status and role of modern women in the social and cultural context. By showing women's independent thinking and choices in various social environments, the film reveals the independence and self-confidence of modern women in their pursuit of personal happiness and self-realisation. Such diverse and deepened expressions continue to enrich the image of women in the gallery of Chinese cinema. Women are no longer just labels or symbols, but individuals with rich emotions and profound connotations, whose stories and experiences inspire deeper thinking among modern women and the public.

2   CHARACTER ANALYSES IN THE FILM

The concept of the male gaze came to be styled in feminist theory by Laura Mulvey (Sassatelli, 2011) [3]. This articulates a particular viewpoint and mode of observance found in pictures, movies, media, and everyday life [4]. A male gaze is a visual environment controlled by men who use the term to refer to women as objects whose social existence lies in their apparent sensuality [5], faults and sexual attractiveness meant for the satisfaction of manly urges and aesthetic needs. This glance positions women in a gaze of surveillance and objectification, emphasising male dominance [6].

Traditional Hong Kong films, generally directed by men, can be divided into two types of female portrayal: one is commercially produced with women as the object of viewing, with their proud figures and pretty faces, and then appearing next to men in gorgeous clothes and dresses, elevating the seduction of women to the extreme, full of

society's "inherent conception" of women (Cheung et al., 1997) [7]. For example, this perception of female portrayal is common in "Naked Weapon" (2002) [8]. The other is that women are given more sympathy and reflection as the main object of concern (Cheung et al., 1997) [8]. Examples include "Rouge" (1087) and "Center Stage" (1991) [9]. However, these films are biased and crude as they look at women from a male standpoint and imitate women's ideas with a male mind.

In a patriarchal cultural system, society's overview of masculinity is always superior to femininity. Take traditional Hong Kong police films as an example, in which the portrayal of female police officers and female gangsters is usually complex (Siu, 2013) [10]. The term "femininity" must be mentioned when discussing female characters. Femininity has a gender connotation, referring to socially and culturally constructed traits of women such as passivity, dependence, and weakness, which include sexual attraction to men and are also referred to as "femininity" (Siu, 2013) [11]. Although many feminists believe that normative femininity is a form of suppression of women by the patriarchal society, it is undeniable that in traditional women's narratives, femininity is expressed as sensual, timid and subordinate. The social role of the police officer itself, on the other hand, is imbued with masculine traits such as rationality, bravery, and mastery.

3   ANALYSIS OF THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

In traditional social concepts, women have always been regarded as the vulnerable, the protected and a symbol of timidity and cowardice, and such cowardice is even taken for granted by most people. However, the police are the maintainers of social order, and their duties require that they be brave and strong, and only in this way can they gain the general public's trust. In this case, the policewoman has become a contradictory combination of cowardice and bravery (Siu, 2013) [12]. Of course, whether in a police film or real life, policewomen's cowardice and bravery are relative. In front of ordinary people, female police officers should be brave. In contrast, in front of male police officers, female police officers' cowardice is permitted because only by sending samples can the male police officers' bravery and strength be highlighted. In "Overheard" (2009) [13], "Dragon Squad" (2005) and other Hong Kong police films, there are female police held hostage by bandits plot, which also creates an opportunity for the male police to save the female police as a hero (Siu, 2013).

The subordination of women police officers is a product of history and ideology. After entering a patriarchal society, paternal authority replaced maternal authority, and human civilisation has since entered a stage of patriarchal domination. A male-centred worldview is the essential feature of patriarchal culture. It treats men as the models and women as heretics and the fringes of social norms. Women slowly changed from the position of subject to that of subordinate, and this, together with the moral concepts of the feudal society, made women lose their autonomy completely. They were reduced entirely to the subordinate of men (Hamilton, 2012) [14]. With the rise of the feminist movement and the spread of feminist ideas, women worldwide began to fight for their

social status and rights. However, in a deeply rooted patriarchal society like China, women are still in a subordinate position (Leung, 2003).

In addition, ideology influences the division of labour between men and women. In Hong Kong police films, female police officers are primarily employed in clerical positions, and most of their work is to assist men in completing their tasks (Cheung, 2007) [15]. The fact that female police officers work in a clerical capacity to complement male police officers in completing their tasks, though inseparable from women's physical qualities and their own characteristics of meticulousness and patience. This is a reflection of the traditional mindset, where men are rightly on the front line of combat, while women's energies are mainly focused on the family.

Ting is a villainous character who spends the film's first half as a meek, soft-hearted gangster boss's mistress. In terms of her image, she is a "vase" that arouses sexual desire and protectiveness. Regarding social image, she is a woman with a certain status and background. As the woman of the gang boss, she is superior, which in turn creates a strong desire for male possession (Desser and Hillenbrand, 2017).

At the film's beginning, Ting does not appear until Lui Kung worships his wife when the camera pulls in close, and the side view of a pretty woman slowly enters from the right side of the screen, wearing a Japanese bun and holding a flower in her hand. As she turns around, the camera moves from bottom to top to the woman's face, where she can be seen wearing a black kimono with sleeves. Although the color of the kimono appears to be severe and dignified, the floral patterns on the kimono accentuate the femininity of the woman and indicate that she should be a married or at least married woman, as the Japanese black kimono with sleeves can only be worn by a married woman. The woman's fine eyebrows, red lips, and white and delicate skin were breathtaking.

4   ANALYSIS OF CLASSIC ROLES IN FILMS

The image of women has played an important role in the history of Chinese film and television art, and has undergone a remarkable evolution with the times, a change not only in artistic expression, but also a vivid reflection of social and cultural evolution and the changing status of women. In the early days of cinema, we see women portrayed as traditional and subservient to a male-dominated society, with their fates and choices often limited by established social frameworks and cultural perceptions. However, with the gradual opening up of society and deeper cultural changes, the images of women in film and television have begun to take on a richer and more diverse appearance.

With the awakening of women's self-awareness and the improvement of their social status, female characters have shown more independence and intelligence in film and television. This transformation is not only a re-modelling of women's roles on the screen, but also a reflection of women's changing social roles and cultural positioning in real life. Women are no longer passive emotional symbols or bearers of traditional morals, but gradually become the dominant storytellers, telling more diverse and profound stories with their unique perspectives and voices. Through these stories, we can see the struggles, growth and self-transcendence that women have experienced in the

long course of history, as well as their continuous exploration and reshaping of their own identities and social roles. This process has enriched the connotation of Chinese film and television art, and has also brought about in-depth thinking about gender equality and women's rights for society.

Take "The Postmodern Life of My Aunt" (2006) as an example; the film delves into the relationship between female characters and their social environment. The film intricately portrays Auntie as an intellectual woman by depicting the interaction between Auntie (played by Sichin Gao Wa) and Pan Zhichang (played by Chow Yun Fat). The aunt is shown to be mean, hypocritical, and selfish in the eyes of the boy, Kuan Kuan, while being stubborn and pretentious at the same time. Her wishful relationship with Pan Zhichang is even more absurd. The film ends with the aunt's departure from Shanghai to her hometown in the Northeast, which director Ann Hui sees as a kind of rebirth. The character of Auntie has to seek her value in a male-dominated society while dealing with various pressures and challenges within the family. This not only reveals the marginalised position of women in society but also shows their plight in both the domestic and private spheres.

In Ann Hui's films, when women are in a state of "being seen", her expression of gender rights remains a rigid and superficial mode of discourse. Even though the director or the leading creator of the film is a woman whose level of creativity is not inferior to that of male creators, the feeling conveyed by the film still unconsciously accepts male bias (Marchetti, 2009).

Shanghai in the film serves as a cosmopolitan backdrop in contrast to the backward Northeast, symbolising vanity and eccentricity, reflecting the environment in which the aunt's particular personality was formed. Meanwhile, the vulgarity, exhaustion and vicissitudes of her daughter Liu Dafan (Zhao Wei) echo the theme of "environment creates behaviour". The film depicts women's traditional and objectified image in a postmodern context, triggering a profound reflection on women's fate and social environment (Marchetti, 2009). Such an analysis demonstrates the depth and complexity of Ann Hui's work. It reflects Marx's view that women's emancipation is not only the emancipation of the individual but also a sign of the development of the whole society in a more just and democratic direction.

While satisfying the entertainment needs of female viewers, female-oriented small films also have a positive impact on their aesthetics and values. For example, female-oriented small films can inspire female viewers to pursue their dreams and build up their self-confidence by showing them as independent, self-confident and brave. At the same time, some female-oriented small films also focus on social issues, such as gender equality, family relations and workplace pressure, which can arouse female viewers' thoughts and concerns about these issues.

5   CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this essay aims to interpret the position of women in Hong Kong's phallocentric film genres. It is revealed that in the Hong Kong cinema environment, female characters are trapped within a male gaze, not only reflecting gender stereotypes and

patriarchal structures but also having an impact on images of women, which leads to their objectification and diminishing portrayals of diversity. While female directors like Ann Hui have been trying to bring new insights to the table, most of all, these efforts end up with women marginalized within male-controlled cultural boundaries, revealing gender prejudices deeply ingrained into filmmaking itself. This demonstrates the boundaries of women's depiction in movies and the audience's perception. The essay also interprets the significance of gender views in describing women's activities within Hong Kong theatre. It clarifies that bias continues to be deeply rooted even in contemporary times, where feminism has gained popularity. These results create unique insights into the understanding and further development of gender perspectives in the global film industry.

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