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Research on the Construction of Struggling Women's Images in Film and Television from the Perspective of Social Gender Theory Postprint

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Abstract

This study employs gender theory and constructivist theory to investigate the evolution of representations of struggling women in film and television dramas since the emergence of feminism in China. First, the methodological approach of content analysis is utilized to perform stratified sampling and systematic coding of struggle-themed films and television dramas spanning the period from 2013 to 2022. Second, data analysis reveals that portrayals of female characters in film and television have undergone significant transformation over the past decade, transitioning from subordinate figures defined by male dependency to autonomous agents. Finally, this study examines the underlying factors driving these shifts in female representation and addresses the societal issues engendered by such discursive transformations.

Full Text

Preamble

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Abstract: This study employs gender theory and construction theory to examine the evolving portrayal of struggling women in film and television dramas since the rise of feminism in China. Using content analysis, the research conducts stratified sampling and coding of struggle-themed films and TV dramas from 2013 to 2022. Data analysis reveals significant changes in female representation over the past decade, with female characters transitioning from male-dependent figures to independent protagonists. The study further analyzes the

factors driving these changes and addresses the social issues arising from this transformation.

Keywords: Feminism; Gender theory; Construction theory; Film and television dramas

1. Introduction

In recent years, feminist discourse has gained significant momentum in China. Notable examples include the sober, courageous, and independent female characters such as Xu Shuting in *The Knockout* and Xu Banxia in *Wild Bloom*, which have garnered widespread attention and acclaim online. Influenced by this feminist wave, an increasing number of struggle-themed films and TV dramas featuring female protagonists have emerged. The representation of women in these narratives has consequently become a critical area of inquiry. Observations indicate that, compared to other female archetypes, images of struggling women have received particular praise from audiences in recent years, with similar character types proliferating across film and television productions. This phenomenon raises an important question: How have portrayals of struggling women in film and TV dramas evolved in recent years?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Construction Theory

Since Piaget first proposed construction theory, scholars worldwide have devoted considerable attention to it, yielding substantial research outcomes. Foreign scholars such as Alismael Omar A., Cifuentes Faura Javier, and AlRahmi Waleed Mugahed (2022) have applied construction theory to empirical studies of online learning, mobile learning, and social media technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic. In China, Li Yuyuan and She Wenbin (2022) integrated actor-network theory and social construction of technology theory with digital journalism research, arguing that these frameworks can help journalism scholars “open the black box” of digital technology, reveal the underlying logic of collaborative production among multiple news actors, and foster continuous social-technological imagination to advance digital journalism research paradigms. Similarly, Chen Jiakai (2022) analyzed Chinese mainstream media’s internet rule-of-law reporting through the lens of framework construction theory, finding that such reporting constructs a legal landscape based on object characteristics, focuses on relevant issues, and uses cases as entry points, though it lacks adequate user perspectives and balanced coverage of legislation and law enforcement.

In 2019, Li Zhengyan examined the construction of female images in urban workplace dramas through *Ode to Joy*, revealing contradictory portrayals that blend rigidity with pluralism, openness with conservatism, and dependence with independence. These studies demonstrate improving trends in representing women

in domestic urban workplace dramas. However, none have specifically analyzed the evolution of struggling women's images in TV dramas from a construction theory perspective, leaving this research question unaddressed.

2.2 Gender Theory

Gender theory, first articulated by American scholar Gayle Rubin in 1975, has attracted extensive scholarly attention and generated significant research. Foreign scholars such as Alcantara J. (2021) have explored gender and journalism, investigating how the gender of news reporters influences news production and how female representations affect industry discourse. Saeed Rizvan (2023) examined Twitter and social capital development from a gender perspective, analyzing social networks for both men and women.

In China, Xun-jie (2004) applied social gender theory to analyze women's channels on websites, concluding that these channels transmit homogeneous female-related content with strong commercial overtones, consciously objectifying and commodifying women to attract users. Huang Yunqin (2011) conducted discourse analysis on *People's Daily's* gender consciousness, using typical character reports since China's reform and opening-up to summarize characteristics of women's reporting and propose that the state, media, and public should jointly promote gender equality. Liu Na and Ding Yixuan (2022) studied male representation and identity in the TV series *Thirty Only* from a gender theory perspective, finding that male portrayals in female-centric dramas reflect both resistance to and entanglement with patriarchal discourse, demonstrating complex correlations between male roles and patriarchy.

Nevertheless, these studies do not examine struggling women's images in film and TV dramas through the lens of social gender theory, and thus fail to answer how these representations have changed.

2.3 Female Images in Film and Television

Since feminism entered public discourse, domestic scholars have studied female images from multiple perspectives. Zhang Zhihua (2021) argues that the portrayal of women in Chinese reality-themed TV dramas is influenced by social trends, changes in women's social status, and cultural concepts. Recent dramas demonstrate strengths in creating diverse female images through realistic means, presenting multi-dimensional women under ethical culture, and emphasizing value orientation. However, problems persist, including stereotypical routines, lack of depth, and biased value directions.

Research on female images across different drama genres has also emerged. Qi Yaling and Zhong Chengxiang (2016) studied rural female images in Chinese TV dramas, analyzing Feitian Award-winning rural dramas from 1983 to 2015. They found that these portrayals reflect national discourse encouraging rural women to change their fate through unremitting effort, elite discourse's concern

for modern enlightenment, and public and male discourse's invocation of traditional and modern roles for rural women. Guo Xuanqi conducted detailed research on female images in Chinese historical dramas adapted from literature, demonstrating that these images express contemporary values through artistic narration and reflect changes in TV drama creative concepts.

2.4 Research Questions

Building on gender theory and construction theory, this study addresses the following question: How have female images in struggle-themed films and TV dramas changed in recent years?

3. Research Method

3.1 Content Analysis Method

This study employs content analysis to investigate the research question: “How has the female image of struggle changed in recent years?”

3.1.1 Sampling Method The research objects are struggle-themed films and TV dramas featuring female images. This genre was selected due to its large audience, capacity to demonstrate key characteristics of female image construction and transformation, and alignment with the research focus, ensuring strong representativeness.

Using random sampling, the study examines struggle films and TV dramas from 2013 to 2022—a ten-year period marking the rise of feminism in China. To account for temporal changes, ten productions were randomly sampled for each two-year period, with the female protagonists selected for analysis.

The samples are distributed across five stages:

Stage 1 (2013-2014): *Shining Days* (Yu Fei), *Legend of Lu Zhen* (Lu Zhen), *Hot Mom* (Xia Bing), *A Clear Midsummer Night* (Xia Wanqing), *Flower Blooms in the Mid-Summer* (Xia Ruhua), *The Wife's Secret* (Jiang Baihe), *Scarlet Heart 2* (Zhang Xiao), *The Lady in Cubicle* (Tan Bin, Mini, Wen Xiaohui), *Love Is Back* (Ming Liang), *Boss & Me* (Xue Shanshan).

Stage 2 (2015-2016): *The Journey of Flower* (Hua Qiangu), *The Secret of Beauty* (Jiang Meili), *You Are My Sunshine* (Zhao Mosheng), *The Legend of Miyue* (Mi Yue), *Best Get Going* (Song Nuan), *The First Half of My Life* (Luo Zijun), *Dear Interpreter* (Qiao Fei), *The Princess Weiyong* (Li Weiyang), *With You* (Geng Geng), *When a Snail Falls in Love* (Xu Xu).

Stage 3 (2017-2018): *Nothing Gold Can Stay* (Zhou Ying), *Pretty Li Hui Zhen* (Li Huizhen), *My PE Teacher* (Wang Xiaomi), *To The Sky Kingdom* (Bai Qian), *Princess Agents* (Chu Qiao), *Siege in Fog* (Qin Sang), *The Story of Yanxi Palace* (Ying Luo), *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace* (Wulanara Ruyi), *The Flame's Daughter* (Lie Ruge), *Legend of Fuyao* (Fuyao).

Stage 4 (2019-2020): *The Story of Ming Lan* (Ming Lan), *All is Well* (Su Mingyu), *Go Go Squid* (Tong Nian), *Don't Take the Time* (Li Xiao), *First Love* (Xia Miaomiao), *Nothing but Thirty* (Gu Jia, Wang Manni, Zhong Xiaoqin), *I Will Find You A Better Home* (Fang Sijin), *Find Yourself* (He Fanxing), *Dear Myself* (Li Siyu, Zhang Zhizhi, Gu Xiaoling), *We Are All Alone* (Mo Xiangwan).

Stage 5 (2021-2022): *Remembrance of Things Past* (Qiao Xichen, Ji Nanjia, Xu Yan), *Delicious Romance* (Liu Jing, Fang Xin, Xia Meng), *The Rebel* (Lin Nansheng), *She and Her Perfect Husband* (Qin Shi), *Wild Bloom* (Xu Banxia), *Reset* (Li Shiqing), *The Story of Xing Fu* (He Xingfu), *Love Between Fairy and Devil* (Xiao Lanhua), *Juvenile School 2* (Lin Miaomiao, Deng Xiaoqi), *Twenty Your Life On 2* (Liang Shuang, Jiang Xiaoguo, Duan Jianguo, Ding Yixuan).

A total of 64 female characters were analyzed. Variable X was operationalized across three temporal dimensions (before, during, and after key events), while Variable Y comprised six categories: genre type, age distribution, social background, role identity, role circumstances, and marital status.

3.1.2 Coding Scheme The coding framework encompassed four dimensions:

(I) Basic Production Information: Genre classification (e.g., fantasy, workplace, biography, suspense, metropolitan, xianxia) and comparative screen time between male and female characters.

(II) Demographic Characteristics: Female characters' age at the beginning and end of the series, initial family background (wealthy, ordinary, poor, orphan), and marital status changes.

(III) Professional Identity: Female characters' occupational status at the beginning and end of the series (senior, middle-upper level, middle class, low class, student).

(IV) Narrative Trajectory: Character circumstances (bottoming out, gradual growth, encountering crisis, always independent) and influencing factors in situation changes (no major external factors, help from male characters, assistance from other female characters).

4. Research Findings and Discussion

4.1 Female Images in Film and Television: From Male Vassals to Independent Subjects

This study examined 1,000 female-themed TV dramas from the past decade, selecting 64 female protagonists from 50 productions through stratified sampling in two-year cycles. Coding and statistical analysis reveal a gradual elevation in women's status on screen, transforming from male-dependent figures and weak girls into independent social subjects with self-awareness who actively struggle against adversity.

Analysis of coded data indicates that following the rise of feminist thought in China, the proportion of significant female supporting roles has increased, with female ensemble casts becoming more common. The number of female roles has grown to exceed male roles. Female characters' family backgrounds have shifted from predominantly wealthy to more ordinary circumstances. Fewer female characters are portrayed as married. Narratively, female characters have evolved from vehicles for creating conflicts and crises to figures who gradually mature. Influencing factors on their situations have shifted from male assistance to either internal factors or support from other female characters.

Thus, during this decade of rapid feminist development, female representations have moved from the naive and dependent “silly white sweet” archetype toward powerful female protagonists and ensemble casts capable of independently navigating various challenges.

4.2 Tracing the Roots of Image Transformation: Education and Social Interaction

Compared to the period preceding feminism's rise, the construction of female images in struggle-themed productions has evolved alongside feminist ideological development. Coding analysis reveals that female characters increasingly come from ordinary family backgrounds and are less frequently married, reflecting the demographic reality of contemporary female audiences. These portrayals present an idealized state that mirrors shifting aspirations among modern women. This evolution demonstrates that as feminist consciousness awakens, women increasingly advocate for their rights, society gradually emphasizes women's value, traditional gender relations are transformed, and social gender increasingly supersedes biological sex, altering gender culture, systems, and structures.

Although feminist thought began rising a decade ago, the shift toward female-centric protagonists predominantly occurred in the fifth stage (2021-2022). This delayed transformation reflects the time required for feminist education and social discourse to permeate public consciousness. As ideas gradually influence creative practices, these evolving portrayals provide modern women with spiritual sustenance and emotional comfort, resonating deeply with audiences.

Despite feminism's development and rising female consciousness, women in real society continue to face family and childbirth pressures while bound by tradition. They still have fewer opportunities for social advancement compared to men. Women yearn for social recognition and struggle to construct self-identity amidst uncertainty. After internalizing feminist consciousness, they long for more opportunities to become independent women in the new era. Film and television productions fulfill these expectations and provide refuge, while female audiences' engagement as primary consumers further drives the development of struggle-oriented female images.

4.3 Critical Reflection on Female Image Construction: Biased Marriage Concepts and Stereotyped Gender Notions

Nevertheless, significant problems persist in contemporary struggle-themed productions. Despite gradual improvements in female representation, romantic dramas still account for 35.26% of female-centric narratives, indicating limited genre diversity. Female roles tend to be younger, and audience expectations for marriage have declined amid feminist discourse. These shortcomings may contribute to gender discrimination and related social problems.

Data analysis shows that during the initial stages of feminist thought development (Stages 1-2), a relatively high proportion of female characters transitioned from single to married status. In recent years, however, married female images have decreased significantly, with many productions ending at the “falling in love” stage rather than depicting marriage. This trend reflects female audiences’ growing indifference toward marriage, potentially contributing to declining marriage rates over time.

Furthermore, actresses’ images in film and television guide women’s aesthetic orientation and imitation patterns. After the awakening of female consciousness, women increasingly aspire to become sober, independent individuals, particularly when such identities prove difficult to achieve in reality, leading them to seek solace in fictional characters. Consequently, some producers deliberately cater to these consumer preferences without guiding audiences toward objective gender perspectives. Over time, the value judgments shaped by these productions may engender problematic social gender perceptions.

5. Conclusion and Reflection

Through content analysis informed by social gender theory and construction theory, this study examines how struggling female images in film and television have evolved in recent years. The findings reveal that with feminism’s rise, the construction of female images in struggle-themed productions has undergone significant transformation.

This research analyzes the basic conditions of female characters and the factors influencing their growth, reflecting the identity development and situational changes of struggling women. Simultaneously, it offers insights for the future development of female-centric dramas in contemporary China.

However, the study also identifies concerning trends: the predominance of single-genre female-led dramas, the general youthfulness of female roles, and the scarcity of productions depicting how female characters genuinely transcend class limitations. These phenomena may negatively impact the development of Chinese female-centric dramas and warrant vigilant reflection.

Due to limited sample size and manual coding, this study has limitations, including insufficient coverage of productions and potential coding errors. Future research should pay greater attention to age diversity and genre variety

in female-centric film and television, while expanding investigations into female image representation since the rise of feminist thought.

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