

# *The Screen Transformation of Women's Image in New China: From Seventeen Years of Cinema to New Era Feminist Cinema*

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**Abstract:** Since the founding of New China, the image of women has been changing on the Chinese film screen along with the ideological changes, and at the same time, it also reflects the development of feminist thinking. During the seventeen years of cinema, women were mostly portrayed as 'women's heroes' and 'labour pioneers', emphasizing their positive roles in revolution and construction, reflecting the positioning and expectations of women's roles in the early stage of the New Democracy and socialist construction. During the Cultural Revolution, under the influence of leftist ideology, the obscure and subtle artistic expression of traditional films was abandoned, and the ideological role of films was played to the extreme, with the images of women in this period further emphasising the inheritance and promotion of the revolutionary spirit. After the reform and opening up, with the opening up of the society and the introduction of western thoughts, the films turned to the exploration of personal emotions and inner world, reflecting the awakening of women's consciousness and the pursuit of self-worth. Entering the 21st century, feminist films have entered a period of rapid development, and the images of women in films have become more diversified and rich, deeply exploring women's roles and status in modern society, as well as women's relationship with society, family and self, with distinctive feminist colours and profound social significance. Through the analysis of representative film and television works in different periods and the theory of the special position of literary works in the superstructure based on the basic principles of Marxism, this paper explores the process of screen change of women's image in New China and its interaction with social ideology and feminist thinking, aiming to provide theoretical references and practical inspiration for the understanding of the development course of Chinese society, the grasp of feminism's trajectory of evolution in China, as well as to promote the creation of contemporary women's cinema. The aim is to provide theoretical reference and practical inspiration for understanding the development of Chinese society, grasping the evolutionary trajectory of feminism in China, and promoting the creation of contemporary female films.

## 1. Introduction

Over the past 75 years since the founding of New China, the image of women has undergone transmutation on the screen of Chinese films in line with changes in social ideology and feminist thinking. During the seventeen years of cinema, women were mostly portrayed as ‘women heroes’ and ‘labour pioneers’, such as Wu Qionghua in *The Red Detachment of Women* and Li Shuangshuang in *Li Shuangshuang*, which conveyed the message that ‘women can hold up half the sky and change the face of the mountains and rivers’. They conveyed the message that ‘women can hold up half the sky and change the face of the mountains and rivers’, and that equality between men and women was the order of the day. During the Cultural Revolution, the image of women became more political and revolutionary, de-gendered and burdened with revolutionary concepts, such as *The White-haired Girl*, and the depth and richness of the image of women was relatively homogeneous[1].

After the reform and opening up, the image of women gradually shifted to the exploration of personal emotions and inner world, such as ‘Lushan Love’ and ‘The Rite of Youth’, which showed the confusion, struggle and growth of women in the period of social transition and cultural conflict and integration, laying the foundation for the development of feminist films afterwards.

Entering the 21st century, feminist films are developing at a high speed, and the images of women are diversified and rich. For example, Sheng Nan in ‘Send Me to the Cloud’ pursues her career dream and personal value, demonstrating the independence of contemporary women, and Xiaowen in ‘Angels Wear White’ bravely defends her rights and interests and faces up to many injustices. These works explore the plight of women in depth and arouse the society's concern and thinking about women's rights and interests, gender equality and the realisation of self-worth.

The change in the image of women in New China, from ‘women's heroes’ to the current diverse and rich images, reflects the change in social ideology and women's self-awareness. This study will help us understand the development of Chinese society and the evolution of feminism, provide theoretical references and practical inspiration for the creation of contemporary women's films, and inspire creators to work on women's themes, tell Chinese women's stories well, and promote the prosperity of the Chinese film industry[2].

## 2. Overview of Feminist Cinema and New China's Ideology

Before discussing feminist film, we should first understand that with the development of feminist theory, feminism has given rise to many schools of thought, such as ‘Liberal Feminism’, ‘Social Feminism’, ‘Radical Feminism’ and so on. ‘We will not make too much discussion and distinction here. The common goal of all feminist theories and schools is to pursue equal rights for women and men and gender equality.

### 2.1 Definition and qualities of feminist film

Feminist film focuses on women's perspectives and issues, and pays attention to women's state of being, psychology, emotion, social roles and gender relations. It strives to break through the stereotypical portrayal and marginalisation of women in the choice of themes, narrative structure and thematic expression, to give women a sense of subjectivity, and to explore the awakening of women's self-consciousness, the quest for gender equality, and the status and value of women in society, and to reveal the role of women in different socio-cultural contexts and the importance of women. It explores the awakening of women's self-consciousness, the pursuit of gender equality, and women's status and value in society, reveals women's plight, psychological struggles and resistance in different social and cultural contexts, and conveys women's aspirations for freedom,

equality, dignity and self-realisation[3].

## 2.2 Overview of the Evolution of New China's Ideology

Since the founding of New China, social ideology has gone through the transition from new democracy to socialism, from the Cultural Revolution's ideology of 'class struggle as the programme' and 'breaking all the old ideas, culture, customs and habits of the exploiting class' to the diversified development after the reform and opening up. After the reform and opening-up period, the ideology of 'breaking all the old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits of the exploiting class', to the diversified development after the reform and opening-up period, and to the deepening of the reform and reshaping of the cultural self-confidence in the new era.

In the New Democracy period, the core of ideology was the overthrow of the 'three mountains' and the realisation of national independence and people's liberation, with an emphasis on class struggle and revolutionary spirit. In the early stages of socialist construction, ideology focused on socialist transformation and construction, advocating collectivism, dedication and communist ideals, and stressing that the national interest was above all else. During the Cultural Revolution, it emphasised not forgetting the class struggle and the people breaking the cyclical law of history from the bottom up[4].

After the reform and opening up, ideology gradually shifted towards economic construction as the centre, advocating emancipation of the mind and seeking truth from facts, encouraging individual struggles and market competition, while advocating pluralism and inclusiveness in the cultural field.

Entering the new era, ideology emphasises comprehensively deepening reform, comprehensively ruling the country according to the law, and comprehensively governing the Party strictly, as well as realising the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, advocating socialist core values, and focusing on cultural self-confidence and the inheritance and development of excellent traditional Chinese culture.

## 2.3 Interaction between Feminist Film and New China's Ideology

According to the basic principles of Marxism, the economic base determines the superstructure, which is divided into politics, law, philosophy, religion, morality, art and other ideologies, and art, as a special superstructure, is related to and influences other ideologies, and feminist films, as a kind of literature and art, also follow this law. Feminist film, as a kind of literary work, also follows the law that there exists a close interaction between ideologies.

The ideologies of different historical periods have shaped the specific social environment and cultural atmosphere, influencing women's living condition, ideology and value pursuit, thus providing rich story materials and profound social connotation for feminist films.

Feminist films also have a counter effect on social ideology, challenging traditional gender concepts by portraying diversified female images and exploring female issues, and promoting the spread of the concept of gender equality and social attention to women's issues, thus contributing to the progress and development of social ideology[5].

### 3. The portrayal of women in the seventeen-year film period



Figure 1: Poster slogans in the early period of socialist construction

The seventeen-year film period was the first film period after the founding of New China, when the new Chinese society underwent radical changes in politics, economy and culture, etc. During this period, the Communist Party of China (CPC) combined Marxist theories of women's emancipation with the actual situation in China, put forward the basic national policy of 'equality between men and women', and passed a series of policies and laws to protect women's rights and interests. During this period, the CPC combined the Marxist theory of women's liberation with Chinese reality, put forward the basic national policy of 'equality between men and women', and safeguarded women's rights and interests through a series of policies and laws. The National Women's Congress held in 1950 also put forward the slogan of 'Women can hold up half the sky', (Poster slogans at the beginning of socialist construction See Figure 1) which not only conferred an equal status to women legally, but also promoted women's emancipation and participation in social production in social practice, and the women of New China really stood up. Since then, women have really stood up[6].

In the cultural sphere, literary and artistic creation in the early years of New China was influenced by socialist realism, which emphasised the social function and educational significance of literary and artistic works. Film, as an important form of literature and art, was entrusted with the important task of propagating socialist ideas and shaping the image of the new socialist man. In this context, the portrayal of women's image has also become an important carrier for conveying socialist values and the idea of women's emancipation.

#### 3.1 Modelling the image of 'women heroes'

In the period of seventeen years of cinema, 'women heroes' was one of the main images of female comrades, which embodied the special expectations and positioning of society for women's roles at that time. In war-themed films, female comrades were portrayed as brave and fearless warriors, with steel guns in their hands, and with athletic postures, they fought alongside their male

comrades on the battlefield, displaying the bravery and boldness of those who say women are not as good as men[7].

In *The Red Detachment of Women*, the best feature film of the first Hundred Flowers Award for Popular Cinema, the female protagonist Wu Qionghua is particularly prominent. She grows up from a woman oppressed by the old society to a strong revolutionary soldier. This transformation not only changes her personal fate, but also symbolises the awakening and strength of women in the revolution. The image of Wu Qionghua shows the important role of women in the revolution and the spirit of sacrifice. Her bravery, resilience and indomitable spirit breaks the traditional social stereotype of women as weak and passive, and inspires women to devote themselves to the revolutionary cause[8].

### **3.2 Presentation of ‘Labour Pioneer’ Image**

In addition to the image of ‘women heroes’, the 17-year film period also portrayed a large number of ‘labour pioneers’, showing the diligence and dedication of female comrades in socialist construction. In production and labour films, women were portrayed as industrious, capable, simple and selfless working women, who worked hard in the fields and sweated in the factories, adding bricks and mortar to the construction and development of new China.

In *Li Shuangshuang*, the best feature film of the Second Hundred Flowers Award for Popular Films, she not only excelled in labour, but also dared to fight against the old ideas and customs, and worked hard to fight for women's rights and interests. The portrayal of these ‘labour pioneers’ reflected the expectations of women's roles in the early years of socialist construction; women were not only builders of families, but also participants in social production, and their hard work was an important force in promoting socialist construction. At the same time, these images also reflected the importance that the society at that time attached to the advancement of women's status, encouraging women to go out of the family, participate in social production and construction, and realise their own values.

## **4. Characteristics of women's screen images during the Cultural Revolution**

During the Cultural Revolution, Chinese cinema abandoned the obscure and subtle artistic expression of traditional cinema, and played the ideological role of cinema to the extreme. Not exactly the same as the seventeen years of cinema period, the image of women presented a unique political mobilisation and gender equality. The female figure is portrayed as a firm bearer and propagator of revolutionary ideas[9].

### **4.1 Further Inheritance and Promotion of Revolutionary Spirit**

In the films of this period, the role of ideology has been played to the extreme. The female figure is not only the disseminator of the revolutionary idea, but also the bearer and promoter of the revolutionary spirit, and the films emphasise the important role and contribution of women in the revolution by portraying the female characters' firm beliefs and indomitable fighting spirit.



Figure 2: Poster of The White Haired Girl (1971)

The image of Li Tiemei in *The Red Lantern* shows her individual bravery and symbolises the firm will and indomitable spirit of the whole revolutionary collective, and the image of Xi'er in *The White-haired Woman* also embodies the inheritance and promotion of the spirit of the revolution. Xi'er and Li Tiemei show a strong spirit of revolution and indomitable fighting spirit in the process of resisting and fighting against the feudal forces and their images have become the inspiration for millions of women who were oppressed by the Three Great Mountains. (Poster for the film 'The White-haired Girl' (1971) See Figure 2) Their images have become an important force to inspire hundreds of millions of women oppressed by the Three Mountains and the sons and daughters of China. The determination and bravery of women in the revolutionary struggle in the history of Chinese cinema almost reached its extreme in this period[10].

#### 4.2 The Depth of Women's Image is Single

Although the image of women during the Cultural Revolution was of great significance in terms of political mobilisation and transmission of revolutionary spirit, its depth and richness were relatively homogeneous. Film creations during this period were deeply influenced by leftist ideology, and the portrayal of women was often limited to the framework of revolutionary struggle, but lacked in-depth portrayal of women's personal emotions, family life and inner world. To a certain extent, this kind of monotonous portrayal has limited the diversity and depth of women's image[11].

### 5. Transformation of women's image after reform and opening up

After the reform and opening up, China's ideology gradually shifted to economic construction as the centre, and literary creation also ushered in a new opportunity for development. During this period, attention to personal emotion and inner world gradually began, and the portrayal of women's image also showed new features.

#### 5.1 Exploration of personal emotion and inner world

With the opening up of ideology, the image of women in films began to shift from the more homogeneous images of revolutionary symbols and labouring women to an in-depth exploration of personal emotions and the inner world. Films of this period paid more attention to the emotional needs and psychological state of women as individuals, showing their complex emotions and inner struggles in the face of life's difficulties, emotional frustrations and social pressures[12].



Figure 3: Poster of Lushan Love (1980)

In the film ‘Lushan Love’, the best actress of the first Chinese Film Golden Rooster Awards, Zhang Yu, who played the role of Zhou Yun, a girl who grew up in the United States, demonstrated the emotional entanglements and inner struggles of women in love and pressures in various aspects, and that first kiss in Chinese cinema history reflected women's longing for freedom of emotion and the pursuit of individuality. This shift to focus on personal emotions not only enriches the connotation of women's image, but also reflects the importance society attaches to individual emotional needs.(Poster for the film ‘Lushan Love’ (1980) See Fig. 3)

## 5.2 Awakening of female consciousness and pursuit of self-worth

Feminist films after the reform and opening up also focus on the awakening of female consciousness and the pursuit of self-worth. During this period, women were no longer satisfied with the expectations and roles assigned to them by traditional society, but began to actively seek the realisation of their self-worth and the pursuit of their personal dreams. The film ‘Ritual of Youth’ follows the footsteps of Li Chun, a female youth, and depicts a paradise-like Dai cottage. Through the intermingling of Chinese and Dai cultures, the film shows women's struggles and growth during the period of social transformation, and highlights women's unique power of life and spiritual charisma[13].

## 6. The Prosperous Development of Feminist Cinema in the 21st Century

Entering the 21st century, feminist films have seen unprecedented prosperity in China, with film creators paying more attention to women's real lives and inner worlds, digging deeper into women's state of being and psychology in different social contexts, and portraying more three-dimensional, realistic and diversified images of women. At the same time, the film also actively explores women's issues, conveys the concept of feminism, triggers the audience's thinking and empathy towards gender issues, and promotes the society's attention to women's issues and solutions. In addition, film creators pay more attention to the innovation and breakthrough of film art in this period, using diversified narrative techniques and image expressions to enrich the artistic form and aesthetic value of feminist films. Through continuous exploration and practice, more feminist films with depth of thought, artistic charm and practical significance have been created, contributing wisdom and strength to the prosperity of China's film industry, and helping women's images blossom more brilliantly on the screen, and becoming an important force in transmitting the spirit of the times and guiding the social trend[14].

## 6.1 Diversified presentation of female image

Feminist films in the 21st century have portrayed a wide variety of female characters. There is a modern urban woman like Sheng Nan in *Send Me to the Clouds*, a female doctor who is independent and pursues her professional dreams and personal values. Facing sexism in the workplace, family expectations and constraints, and personal emotional distress, she bravely sticks to herself and strives to break through in the male-dominated medical field, which shows the resilience and unyieldingness of contemporary women in the process of pursuing career success and realising their personal values. This shows the resilience of contemporary women in their pursuit of career success and realisation of personal values[15].

There is also a cultivator of education like Li Fang in *'When the mountain flowers are in full bloom'*, a people's teacher who quietly dedicates herself to the cause of education. In the face of critical moments, she fulfils her oath of joining the Party with her actions, and demonstrates the moral heights of a people's teacher with her love, which makes her an excellent representative of the Communists in the new era, and a well-deserved hero of the times.

There are also single mothers like Wang Tiemei in *The Good Stuff*, who is both a father and a mother, taking care of her children, moving house, cleaning toilets and changing air-conditioning filters on her own, and is an all-powerful 'Superman', surviving in the cracks between her family and her career, which demonstrates the strength and independence of modern women in the face of life's difficulties. These diversified images of women not only enrich the connotation of feminist films, but also enable the audience to understand and feel the state of women's lives and inner world from different angles and levels, thus triggering wider resonance and reflection[16].

## 6.2 In-depth Exploration of Women's Issues

In the feminist films of the 21st century, women's issues have been explored in depth like never before. Issues such as gender equality, women's rights and interests, women's plight, balance between family and career, and women's self-identity and value realisation have become the focus of the films.

Movie poster for *'Angels Wear White'* focuses on the situation of women in the midst of social injustice. Through the story of Xiaowen, it reveals the courageous struggle of women in the face of sexual harassment, domestic violence and other injustices, and triggers profound reflection on the protection of women's rights and interests as well as gender equality in the society.(Poster of the film *'Angels Wear White'* (2017) See Figure 4)

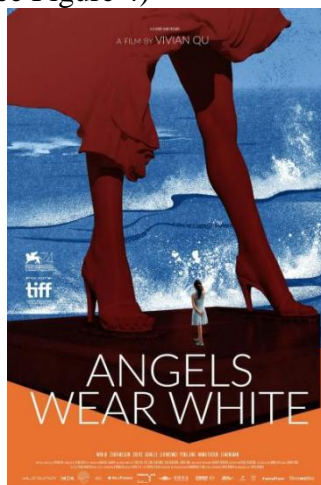


Figure 4: Movie poster for *'Angels Wear White'* (2017)



'Her Stor' also focuses on women's life experiences, inner world and values, showing women's strength, vulnerability and not easily understood sides, subverting the traditional stereotypes of women's roles, and presenting the emotional and psychological changes of Wang Tiemei and Xiaoye.

Through the in-depth exploration of women's issues, these films not only give voice to women, but also provide impetus for society to reflect and make progress, and promote the dissemination of the concept of gender equality and the enhancement of women's rights and interests.

### 6.3 Innovation in Artistic Expressions

In terms of artistic expression, feminist films in the 21st century also show a diverse trend of innovation.

With its unique narrative perspective and light-hearted humour, 'Her Stor' is highly enjoyable, allowing the audience to feel the classic themes of growth, understanding, redemption and love, and to understand the complexity of human nature while they are laughing.

At the same time, the film also pays more attention to the expression of women's perspective in its image style, using delicate camera language, soft tones and symbolic image symbols to create a unique female atmosphere. For example, in *Send Me to the Clouds*, the director uses a large number of hand-held lenses, as well as the clever handling of light and shadow and colours, so that the film presents a real and dreamy visual effect, which not only shows the delicate emotions of women's hearts, but also conveys a profound reflection on women's destiny. These innovations in artistic expression not only enhance the artistic quality of feminist films, but also make the films more vividly present the state of women's lives and inner worlds, and enhance the film's infectious and expressive power.

## 7. Conclusion

Throughout the 75 years of New China's history, it is a magnificent epic full of changes and struggles. In this long history, the transmutation of women's image on the film screen not only reflects the profound change of social ideology, but also the awakening and growth of women's self-consciousness.

From the heroic images of 'women's heroes' and 'labour pioneers' in the seventeen years of cinema, to the inheritors and promoters of the revolutionary spirit, which reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution, to the delicate exploration of personal emotions and the inner world after the reform and opening up, to the diversified prosperity of feminist cinema in the twenty-first century, feminist cinema has become a major force for change in society. This series of changes in the image of women on the screen is like a mirror reflecting Chinese society's perception and expectation of women's roles and values at different stages of history.

The change of women's image on screen is not only an epic of women's self-awakening and growth, but also a history of the interaction and mutual promotion of social ideology and feminist thinking. This process of change provides an important perspective and inspiration for us to understand the development of Chinese society and the evolution of feminism in China.

In the future, with the further development of society and the awakening of women's consciousness, feminist cinema is bound to have a broader development prospect. We expect film creators to continue to work on women's themes, dig deeper into women's state of being and psychology in the new era, and create more feminist films with depth of thought, artistic charm and practical significance, so as to make greater contributions to the promotion of gender equality, social progress, and the prosperity of film culture, and to let women blossom with a more brilliant lustre on the stage of the new era, and to work hand in hand with the times to strive for the cause of

communism.

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