

Female As Method: The Chinese-American Female Narrative in Films of Contemporary Chinese-American Directors

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Abstract

In recent years, Chinese-American themed films created by Chinese-American directors have attracted attention from within the United States and around the world, as well as from the academic community. In many relevant studies that have emerged, there has been a lack from the point of view of the Chinese-American female narrative. This study has selected five Chinese-American films that have had a certain impact in the past few years: *Crazy Rich Asians* (Chu, 2018), *The Farewell* (L. Wang, 2019), *The Half of It* (Wu, 2020), *Turning Red* (Shi, 2022), *Everything Everywhere All Once* (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022). All of which coincidentally chose to feature Chinese-American women as their protagonists. Mainly using the feminist narratology brought by Susan S. Lanser, the paper explores how Chinese-American directors have constructed film narratives with female as method, while pointing out their future prospects.

Keywords: female narrative, Chinese-American directors, film narratology, feminist narratology

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Introduction

From Ang Lee to Chloe Zhao, from *The Joy Luck Club* (W. Wang, 1993) to *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022), Chinese-American filmmakers never stopped exploring the portrayal of Chinese-Americans on screen from various aspects like identity, family bond, community, culture, and so on. Since the commercial success of *Crazy Rich Asians* (Chu, 2018), Chinese-American films have attracted even more focus from not only American society but also the whole world as they swept through film festivals and awards, causing heated discussions both at public and academic levels. Scholars utilize various methods to compare, induce and conclude valuable approaches to current academic research and filming practice. For instance, Li and Li (2019) compare the Chinese-American narratives in *The Joy Luck Club* and *Crazy Rich Asians* to discover contemporary Hollywood's shift in the cultural construction of the Eastern world, the differences that exist between the heterogeneous cultures of East and West; Kung (2021) analyzes the postfeminist Cinderella narrative in the film to recognize the subjectivity given to the female protagonist; Wang and Wang (2022) choose the cultural theory of the Third Pole to explain the cultural practice phenomenon of *Crazy Rich Asians* and *The Farewell* (L. Wang, 2019). When it comes to the holistic analysis of contemporary Chinese-American films, Qi (2022) takes an insightful reading into *Crazy Rich Asians*, *The Farewell*, *Turning Red* (Shi, 2022) and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (referred to as EEAAO). She points out that despite the progress of Chinese-American narratives made by these films, they repeat the same mother-and-daughter relationship and therefore confine Chinese-American films in a rather privatized domain. But aside from this point of view, few other studies conclude the female subject narrative of these recent films altogether.

Therefore, this essay wants to discuss the female narrative in films made by contemporary Chinese-American directors, analyzing the image of female characters and the narrative of those films. Five films that came out last few years have been chosen, which are *Crazy Rich Asians*, *The Farewell*, *The Half of It* (Wu, 2020), *Turning Red*, and *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Through the analysis of these films, this study wants to find out how the Chinese-American directors choose Chinese-American female characters as the main protagonists in their films and how they use female narrative as a new method to the whole making of Chinese-American films.

Feminist Narratology and Films

In the 1986 article *Toward a Feminist Narratology* by American scholar Susan S. Lanser, the concept of feminist narratology was first introduced and systematically explained. In 1992, another book on feminist narratology appeared, Susan S. Lanser's *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*. In this book, she proposes to combine "voice" in narratology with "voice" in feminist literary criticism, and to categorize narrative voice into three modes, namely, authorial voice, personal voice, and communal voice. In her denunciation of patriarchal Phallus-centrism based on women's identity as manifested in literary practice, Lancer points out that any narrative subject needs to construct a discursive authority to get close to the dominant social power. It is based on this fact that the discourse formed by textual writing strategies, i.e. the narrative voice, becomes a way of constructing authority.

When it comes to the field of film narratology, being the very scholar to bring out the middle theory and draw people's attention back to the films' inner text, Bordwell (1986) proposes

that “the classical narration tends to be omniscient, highly communicative, and only moderately self-conscious.” This view of film narratology suggests a singular (usually male) spectator, which is opposed by many feminist film critics. The most notable example is Laura Mulvey’s 1975 article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Mulvey points out that narrative cinema constructs a subject that is centralizing the male audience, objectifying the female characters on screen. The male audience gains recognition firstly through the camera, and secondly through the point of view of the male characters. It is by fulfilling the voyeurism of the male audience that traditional cinema can create visual pleasure. This male, Eurocentric norm of narrative cannot apply to some diasporic cultures such as Asian-Americans. Machiorlatti (1996) introduces the feminist narratology into the field of indie film study and explores the possible structures toward a feminist narratology in films of Julie Dash, Mona Smith and Trinh T. Minh-Ha, who are female directors of independent films featuring different minority female. However, in this paper, the writer wants to expand the scope of applying feminist narratology in film study. Rather than taking it as an approach to studying certain independent films (which also can be taken into the category of “minor cinema” (Martin-Jones, 2009), the paper will try to combine the feminist narratology with a broader selection of films, even taking into account of American genre films to meet the richer and bigger range of contemporary Chinese-American directors’ films.

The Narrative Voice in Films of Contemporary Chinese-American Directors

The voice in narratology as proposed by Genette (1980) and expanded upon by Brian Henderson for cinema studies is the narration itself, or “who speaks.” Aside from the character narrator, narrative voice also recognizes narration that is understood as the grand (cinematic) narrator working outside the diegesis. Cinematic narration can include all of the technical aspects of lighting, mise en scene, editing, and sound. The cinematic or impersonal narrator “both creates or constructs the fictional world while at the same time referring to it as if it has an autonomous existence, as if it pre-existed the illocutionary act” (Stam, 2005). Cinematic narration can also be ideologically commentative and question dominant ways of representation. In this situation, the placement of women being at the center of film acts as feminist cinematic narration. We can see their centrality in non-hierarchical and non-stereotypical representation (Machiorlatti, 1996). And the writer will apply the theory of feminist narratology proposed by Lanser with the concept of narrative voice in film narratology to elaborate the narrative voice in contemporary Chinese-American directors’ films.

Authorial Voice: Revisiting The Duality of Chinese-American Females’ Cultural Identity

Lanser (1992) characterizes the authorial narrative voice as “narrative situations that are heterodiegetic, public, and potentially self-referential.” “Heterodiegetic” is referred to the narrator that is not equal to the characters in the story, but outside the story. Also, “public” means that the object of the narration is the imagined readership, as she writes that “where a distinction between the (implied) author and a public, heterodiegetic narrator is not textually marked, readers are invited to equate the narrator with the author and the narratee with themselves (or their historical equivalents). This conventional equation gives authorial voice a privileged status among narrative forms.” In this case, the writer recognizes *The Farewell* directed by Lulu Wang as a film that adopts this mode of narration. Because this film creates a calming space between the narration and the audience, through which obscuring the fictional storytelling and the self-referential sense throughout the film.

Although the whole film does not apply a detached monologue, the director uses a constrained and soothing way to unfold the narration. In the beginning of the film, a caption has already told us that this story is “Based on an actual lie.” What emerges on the screen next is a landscape painting that looks like a decoration on the wall, filling out the whole screen. We do not see the first person in this film after the title and the director’s name disappears until a few moments later Nai Nai enters the frame from the left side. This scene sets the tone and the main framing technique for the whole film, which shooting the family as a landscape, with the protagonist Billi placed in the center or the position that is closest to audience in depth of field.

After successfully guiding the audience into the story, the director Lulu Wang along with her collaborator, director of photography Anna Franquesa-Solano choose to use simple, clean and minimal style to frame shots that help tell the story (O’Falt, 2020). In deciding the visual language for the film, Wang and Solano decided to represent their subjects both as a family monolith and as individuals. This shooting of a family as a landscape is composed of individual natural elements, so too was the family composed of individual characters. Wang says that “the film revolves around family unity; that led us to take an objective approach to the visual language. It called for a wider aspect ratio that include as many family members as possible in the frame, even though we still had to feel that the protagonist (Billi) is the one who takes us through this journey. It was a delicate balance” (Filmmaker Staff, 2019). The audience goes along with the story but is also not fully engaged, until they see an extra video of Lulu Wang’s real-life grandmother at the end of the film. And the subtitles read, “Six years after her diagnosis, Nai Nai is still with us.” The subtitle served as the author’s voice appears again, reminding the audience of the ending of the real-life story. By doing so, the creators obscure the line between fictional narration and the self-referential sense. Although both exploring of cultural differences between the East and the West through the preparation and organization of a wedding, *The Farewell* differs from the *The Wedding Banquet* (Lee, 1993): the director no longer chooses to present the film as a field where the two cultures are in stark opposition to each other, but rather accepts the duality of Chinese American women’s cultural identity; based on the director’s real-life experience which provides the self-referential tone to the film, there is no insurmountable gap between the female protagonist, Billi, and her grandmother. Instead, there is always a sense of respect and attachment. It is Nai Nai who represents the attachment of the protagonist to the far-away homeland; it is Nai Nai who offers a new way for the protagonist to reexamine her life.

In the end of the film in which Billi stands on the street of New York, A “ha” she exclaims in scares away the birds in Changchun. This perplexing method of editing breaks the limit of time and space, also breaking the gap between America and China. The female protagonist’s sense of belonging shifts with the change of locations, but the end has obscured the difference between “foreign land” and “homeland.” Dealing with the cultural identity of the Chinese-American female, the director provides an answer without the answer, which acknowledges the duality of Chinese-female identity by not showing a strong tendency toward either country.

Personal Voice: Retelling Chinese-American Females’ Own Story

Lanser points out that the personal voice refers to “narrators who are self-consciously telling their own histories.” The object of the narration is the character in the story, the “I” narration as a first-person narrator and participant. In other words, the storyteller “I” is not only the narrator of the story, but also the participant of the story, the narrator of her own story. Lanser

suggests with personal voice that both intra and extra diegetic narrative voice should be understood as equal fictions of authority within the text through illustrating the works written by some African-American women as they “restores the black female narrator to a black female audience.” Similar to what African-American female writers did, the director Alice Wu retells the story of the Chinese-American female who belongs to the second generation of immigrants by her own mouth.

The Half of It begins with the protagonist Ellie Chu’s monologue that tells a theory about “finding the other half of our soul” that comes from Plato in Ancient Greece and takes an abrupt turn: “Of course...the Ancient Greeks never went to high school.” This brings our focus onto the film’s story and where it takes place, injecting a basic humorous tone to this school romantic comedy. Meanwhile, the beginning conveys a clear message to the audience that this film is going to unfold mainly revolving Ellie’s perspective. As the story rolls along, Ellie shows a nerd-like trait and also has great scores, even ghostwrites essays for other students in order to earn extra money, which resembles very much with the Model Minority Myth mentioned by Blackburn (2019). Wu does not stop the shaping of her image from there. In the following plots, she shows us that Ellie also has a sensitive heart and a very cute side through a calm, fresh and natural narrative.

The off-screen voice plays a significant role in the narrative because the director often visualizes the different conversations between Ellie and Aster through letters, spray-paintings and text messages, accompanied by their voicing out the inner thoughts. For instance, in a scene where Ellie and Aster communicate through letter exchange, what Ellie writes appears as a voice-over: “I sometimes hide behind other people’s words. For one thing, those people are published. For another...I know nothing about love.” Upon hearing Paul’s request to ask Aster to “hang out”, Ellie’s own thoughts emerge and entangle with the letter: “What exactly is... ‘hanging out’? But like what do you do?” The lines show double narrative voice in which Ellie not only pretends to be Paul but also hides behind the identity of a boy to express her true feelings. Aster does not know the truth as the audience does, thus what is supposed to be the romantic feelings exchanged between a girl and a boy is replaced by two girls expressing their inner feelings and thoughts. In this way the authority of the narrative voice is silently reestablished.

What Alice Wu achieved in this film is being able to retell the story of Chinese-American female’s own through personal voice. As a second generation immigrant, Ellie jumped out of the cycle of generational traumas which can be seen in many other films of Chinese-American directors, including Director Wu’s previous work *Saving Face* (2004). The story is solely focused on a rather simple campus story, featuring three main characters with different races and sexualities. Through the director’s calm and relaxed narrative, also the voice-over by the protagonist, the audience is able to empathize with her feelings, thoughts and story. The director shows us that despite being a minority, the story of Chinese-American female does not have to be “minor,” just like the end of the film where Ellie stepped on the train that take her to the wider world outside the small town.

Communal Voice: Reinventing Chinese-American Female Representation in Genre Films

The third voice category that Lanser outlines is the communal voice, which refers to “a spectrum of practices that articulate either a collective voice or a collective of voices that share narrative authority.” In this part, the writer uses the idea of communal voice/narration

mainly as a means to further understand the content of films in which female commonalities and differences are central. “Communal voice is the voice which understands women’s consciousness. It recognizes multiple character narrators as well as a centralizing feminist ideological and cultural perspective” (Machiorlatti, 1996). The writer will put the argument specifically on the depiction of the female character groups in three genre films, as they all simultaneously spend a great deal of time on narrating generational trauma and use this experience as a bridge to connect the Chinese-American women in the stories, thus serving as a representation of Chinese-American female on the big screen.

Focusing on similar generational traumas as *Crazy Rich Asians*, *Turning Red* and *EEAAO* may, they all choose a side of traditional Chinese culture that Chinese-American female have troubles dealing with in a cross-cultural environment they live in. In the case of *Crazy Rich Asians*, the major conflict takes place in marriage and Chinese women’s social status in different cultural environments. In a scene where Rachel and Nick gather with his family to make dumplings together, a conversation about passing traditions is exchanged. “...It’s nice you appreciate this house and us being together wrapping dumplings. But all this doesn’t just happen. It’s because we know to put family first, instead of chasing one’s passion.” The “we” she uses could refer to the elite circle of Singaporean Chinese communities. But most importantly, she is referring to the women in this society and accusing Rachel of not being one of them. The traditional Eastern culture does not value women’s ambition or dedication and in fact actively discourages it. So Rachel’s ambition and accomplishments aren’t the positive traits she thought they would be, but a threat to their social order.

The mahjong scene at the end of the film is a climax and also the turning point for the whole film. In this iconic scene, eventually Rachel tells Eleanor about Nick’s proposal and that he is willing to leave his family to be with her. “Don’t worry I turned him down.” Rachel finds the tile that she needs to win the game, but realizes it’s also the tile Eleanor needs. In this moment, Rachel explains there is no winning in this scenario, as marrying Nick means he would have to give up his family. In an analogy of letting go of Nick, she surrenders the winning tile to Eleanor, sacrificing her own happiness for the betterment of Nick’s well-being—an act Eleanor assumed she wasn’t capable of. It is a powerful moment that makes Eleanor reconsider her assumptions about Rachel. She notices Rachel’s mother nearby and the simple look they give each other expresses a lot from their differences in upbringing, class and also their respective traumas in each of their lives. But it also acknowledges their mutual respect for the sacrifices they’ve made to protect their families. Rachel’s characterization shows there is a way to do both to try to do what’s best for the people you love and pursue what you want in life, which can also mark the achievements made by the second generation immigrants to successfully balance their in-betweenness. And once Eleanor realized she has been perpetuating the cycle of judgement and ridicule all for the sake of saving face, she made a decision to start undoing the patterns of discouraging women of the next generation. This also means that Eleanor finally considers bring Rachel into the “we” she uses. At the very end of the film, while Nick and Rachel is happily hugging together at the party to celebrate their engagement, Eleanor is not only nodding to Rachel through a bustling crowd, but also nodding to the new identity that comes along with the new wit of the entire second generation of Chinese-American women.

Starting with the perspective and story of the main female protagonist, the film end with connecting the Chinese-female characters together by solving their generational trauma, rather say, common dilemma, which is not recognizing their own value enough. Henceforth, this very first film in Hollywood history that has all-Asian cast gave the power of

representation and thus paving the way for more films to feature Chinese-Americans, also placing Chinese-American female in the center of the narration once again.

The cultural experience *Turning Red* faces on is the family education or being raised in a high-pressured Chinese family. The suffocating experience lies subtly as in the early half the film where the protagonist Meilin Lee battles with many things inside. What may tick the bottom of the heart even more is that because of growing up in this family atmosphere for too long, Meilin takes the blames of everything wrong in her life on herself, trying desperately to be “mother’s good girl.” This has much to do with the authoritarian parenting style in China playing a role of authority and they do everything in the name of “for the good of children,” while the children are expected to obey and serve their parents, maneuvering to meet the standard of “a good child.”

In the fantasy world of their ancestors, Meilin discovers that her mother was once merely a helpless girl crushed by stress and expectations from the outside. This time, it is Meilin’s turn to comfort her mother. When they make it to the portal leads to the real world, Ming asks her once more to go together. But Meilin refuses. Ming finally understands. “...I’m sorry. So don’t hold back, for anyone. The farther you go, the prouder I’ll be.” From here, the mother and the daughter break free from the generational trauma and comes to mutual understanding. At the very end of the film comes the monologue of Meilin: “We’ve all got an inner beast. We’ve all got a messy, loud, weird part of ourselves hidden away. And a lot of us never let it out. But I did. How about you?” This reveals that the red panda symbolizes an emotional, outgoing self, used to correspond to the emphasis on calmness and self-possession in Eastern cultures that advocate the suppression of one’s own emotions and desires. It adds another layer of metaphor, which is the way the protagonist chooses not to give up on her red panda spirit implies that the second generation immigrants makes more peace with accepting the double cultural identity they have. Through these metaphors, the director shows us a real dilemma that is fantastical in the movie but may be truly faced by Chinese women in reality. The “we” Meilin uses emphasizes common experiences of Chinese-American females and expresses that they need to let out their emotions sometimes instead of held back by the weight of demands from the traditional Eastern culture. Moreover, through solving the generational trauma, the film is able to find a common ground for real life Chinese-American female to stand on.

In EEAAO, the directors Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert has featured Chinese-American experience as the “loss of the American Dream” of the first generation immigrants, especially for women. As a start, the film confronts the various ever-on-going troubles in the protagonist Evelyn’s life: forever busy work in the laundry house, stacking-high bills and tax sheets, the need of taking care of the elderly, maintaining a good relationship with the neighborhood and a gradually distancing daughter. This just shows a common daily life of the first generation immigrants that can link back directly to the real world. On the way of solving those problems, Evelyn finds out the secret of living a life: reach out to others, which finally makes her face the estrangement between herself and her father, find a way to reconnect with her daughter, and through chatting with the female clerk, she discovers that they have far more in common than imagined—every woman faces common problems in her life.

The directors create a new possibility for constructing the communal voice. That is, connecting different lives and images of the protagonist in the multiverse by constantly shifting between universes in excellently edited parallel montage. The editing often connects the same plot, also the same movement in the shots together. This design of verse-jumping

provides unique self-empowerment to the female protagonist (Coe, 2023). The creation of diverse film spaces to present different lives becomes such a presentation that propels audience think of the infinite possibilities of one woman's life—most importantly, one Chinese-American woman's life.

At the end of the film, when Evelyn in the main universe chases Joy out of the door, Joy begs her to let go. But suddenly the main-universe Evelyn turns around and expresses that she chooses to stay with her. "Then I will cherish these specks of time." Upon her speaking, the multiverse makes a turn where the hero Evelyn successfully pulls villain Joy out of the black hole; chef Evelyn determines to help her colleague get the raccoon back; rock Evelyn takes a free fall off the cliff along with rock Joy; star Evelyn gets another chance with star Waymond...So many universes flash by and then the shot eventually sets on Evelyn and Joy coming into a full embrace, tears streaming down their faces. Through so many universes and possibilities, they finally find each other again. When they are parted, Joy asks: "Do you still want to do your party?" "We can do whatever we want. Nothing matters." Although the generation gap between Evelyn and her daughter Joy still exists, they finally have more understanding and tolerance for each other, and are able to have a harmonious mother-daughter relationship. In this touching moment, the "we" they use reveals that the peace made by Evelyn and Joy is not only between the two characters, but also between the first and second generation immigrants.

By looking into different images of Chinese-American female and connect them together, these films speak louder voices of Chinese-American women on screen, thus showing strong representations with their presence. Chinese American women can identify as a virtual community because they watch the same movies and recognize each other and themselves in their filmic representations (Coe, 2023).

Conclusion

This paper picks out five films released in past few years that place Chinese-American female at the center of the narrative, trying to take a look into their narrative voices, inducing further discussions. Utilizing three narrative voices by Lanser as a means, This paper examines how contemporary Chinese-American directors respond to the cultural need of diasporic groups in our time by putting Chinese-American women at the center of the narrative. With the female narrative built within these films, the image of the Chinese-American female is also being reshaped today. From the perspective of feminist narratology, we can also see that these films try to find a new balance between the duality of Chinese-American women's cultural identity, narrate new story of these women as second-generation immigrants in 21st century, and reinvent the representation of Chinese-American female in different genre films. The contemporary Chinese-American directors are willing to set aside the cultural conflicts, choosing to focus more on a common feminist view instead. That is not to say that the cultural conflicts are completely dissolved, but inferring that these films turn their faces to the collective reality where Chinese-American women live, which is a viewpoint of more modernity.

The limitations of this study may lie in the lack of cases, since the writer only picks five films that are directed by Chinese-American directors and have a certain impact. Also, due to the lack of relevant studies of constructing an adaptable method to operate female narratology brought by Lanser on film studies, the specific methods the author use to analyze the narrative voice in this paper may need further examination.

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