

An Analysis of the Portrayal of Madwomen in the Films of the Sixth Generation of Chinese Directors

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Abstract

The sixth generation of Chinese directors is a special group of Chinese directors, who are both rebellious to the control of the film system and self-expressive, and their works are often rich in meaning, well-received, and recognized by the film industry both at home and abroad. The representative figures include Lou Ye, Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai, Gu Changwei, etc. The focus of their films is no longer the same as films before, but more on the lower class people, such as the lower class people with difficult lives, the youth groups with growing pains, and the working-class people in the urban corners. They show their helplessness and confusion in difficult situations, and their strong will to struggle and fight for their lives so that people can feel the shock and power brought by the art of tragedy. However, the portrayal of women in their films has not been given much attention, and the "madwomen" have received even less attention among the many female images. The "madwoman" is usually a superficial, stereotypical portrayal of women, a stigmatized construction of women. This paper will focus on the analysis of "madwomen" in the films of the sixth generation of Chinese directors and explore the position of Chinese women in the social and cultural spheres through the context of the Chinese era.

Keywords: Feminism Film Study, The Chinese Sixth Generation, Madwoman, Images of Woman, Woman Fatale

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Introduction

1.1 Theory background

The term "Madwoman" comes from S.M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which offers a very different perspective on 19th-century authors and literature from a feminist reading of literary criticism. The image of the "madwoman" is derived from the character of Bertha in Charlotte Brontë's book *Jane Eyre*. Bertha is Rochester's ex-wife, who is kept in the attic of the top floor of the house by Rochester and is called the "madwoman. In previous literary studies, scholars have often focused on Jane Eyre and Rochester, while neglecting the role of Bertha. In the novel's portrayal, Bertha is of exotic descent and has strong violent tendencies; she tries to set fires and harm Rochester, so it is reasonable for Rochester to lock her in the attic, and his affair with Jane Eyre in the midst of a marital relationship is made acceptable by the stigmatization of Bertha. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, however, the authors consider the characterization of Bertha to be stigmatization and use it to discuss the challenges women face in the field of literary creation.

In the field of film studies, it is important to study the portrayal of the "madwoman". In the field of cinema where women are always placed as the OTHER (the second sex), women are always portrayed as two polarized images, namely the meek "angel" and the threatening "demon" or "femme fatale". The "angel" image is very dependent on the male and less resistant, while women (femme fatale) with a certain degree of independence and financial ability are often portrayed as "femme fatale", and the economic source of such image often comes from doing sexualized work. Such polarized characterization stems from the romanticized imagination of men and dwarfing of women, and within the realm of film, women are colonized, their images and personalities shaped by vested interests. However, Gilbert and Susan's idea of the "madwoman" offers a new way of thinking about the existence of the "madwoman" in cinema and the socio-cultural environment it reflects.

This study takes the films of the sixth generation directors as the research vehicle, and there are four main ways to define the sixth generation directors. The first is to divide them according to the directors' educational experiences, with the students of Class 85 and Class 87 of the Beijing Film Academy as the main body. Secondly, according to the style and filming system, Chinese scholar Dai Jinhua proposed in *Landscape in the Mist: A First Reading of the Sixth Generation* that "the Sixth Generation includes independent filmmakers who emerged in the 1990s, made low-budget feature films, and were outside of the mainstream production system and film censorship system, and were financed by individuals or supported by the European Cultural Foundation. ". Third, it defines the sixth generation of directors recurring after the fifth generation of directors. In *Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, Chen Xiaoyun points out that the fifth generation usually takes history and vernacular as the main subject, reflects on Chinese national culture, and focuses on macro narratives, while the sixth generation often focuses on social reality, marginalized groups, and micro-narratives. Fourth, special pronouns are used to refer to the sixth generation of directors. In his book *My Camera Doesn't Lie*, Cheng Qing-song summarizes the terms used by different regions for the Sixth Generation directors, such as "Chinese underground film creators" in Europe and America, and "Seven Junzi" in Hong Kong and Taiwan. In Mainland China, they are called "independent filmmakers" or the "new documentary movement".

Since most of the Sixth Generation directors grew up in a turbulent era, "the cultural community almost universally perceives Chinese culture in the 1990s as a superficially

pluralistic but culturally incoherent cultural space". This contradictory cultural environment has nurtured the work of the sixth generation of directors and shaped a style that is unique to this generation. Repression and desire are often the subjects of discussion, and personal confusion fills these films one after another, creating the unique style of the Sixth Generation. In the history of Chinese cinema, the works of the Sixth Generation are like isolated children, telling their own stories of obsession, and their stories have in turn enthralled the confused youth.

After the Sixth Generation, there is no longer a generational division of Chinese directors, which shows the uniqueness of the Sixth Generation. As a model of Chinese auteur cinema, the works of the Sixth Generation directors often have high artistic value, and therefore the films of the Sixth Generation directors will be chosen as the sample for this study. At the same time, it should be noted that there are few influential female directors in the Sixth Generation, which is also the focus of this study.

1.2 Literature review

In the previous studies on female images in film works, the following characteristics are presented. First, it tends to conduct research on the change of female images within a certain time period, such as "A Study on the Propagation of Female Images in Domestic Youth Films since the 1990s(Zhao, 2020)", which explores the propagation of female images and their cultural implications in the context of social development. Second, it is a study of female images according to the country or cultural attributes, such as "The Shaping of Female Images in Indian Films - Taking Films Starring Aamir Khan from 2011-2018 as an Example(Hou, 2018)", to explore the female images in the films in which specific creators are involved and interpret the socio-cultural environment that shaped them. Third, it is a study of a specific director's work, such as "A Study of the Image of Women in Luc Besson's Films(Chen, 2020)". Fourth, it is a study of a specific film, such as "The Changing Imagination of Women in the Film 'The Blind Mountain'(Sun, 2018)". Fewer studies have been conducted on the image of women in a certain group of domestic directors, and they are mainly focused on a group study of the image of women, such as "A Study of the Image of Women in the Film Works of the Sixth Generation of Chinese Directors(Ao, 2013)". Such a research approach can provide a macro understanding of the female group in film works, but at the same time, it tends to focus on the protagonists and ignore the marginal supporting characters, who tend to show polarized characteristics and enhance the focus on female stereotypes. In this paper, we focus on the Madwomen, the stereotyped image of women, and how women break through the shackles and traditional expectations.

1.3 Study purpose

The sixth generation of Chinese directors is a special group in China, who are both rebellious to the control of the film system and self-expressive, and their works are often rich in meaning, well-received, and recognized by the film industry both at home and abroad. The representative figures include Lou Ye, Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai, Gu Changwei, etc. The focus of their films is no longer the same as films before, but more on the lower class people, such as people with difficult lives, the youth groups with growing pains, and the working-class people in the urban corners. They show their helplessness and confusion in difficult situations, and their strong will to struggle and fight for their lives so that people can feel the shock and power brought by the art of tragedy. However, the portrayal of women in their films has not been given much attention, and the "madwomen" have received even less

attention among the many female images. This study will focus on the analysis of "madwomen" in the films of the sixth generation and explore the position of Chinese women in the social and cultural spheres through the context of the Chinese era.

2 Creating Women in Film

By holding to the right of creation, male directors occupy the resource of film production from script to directing and editing, who can depict women as their imagination, regardless of the inner thoughts of real women. In the sixth generation's film, there are two kinds of typical women images, namely angel and femme fatale, while the existence of madwomen firstly reflects directors' attitude towards women and secondly brings a new perspective of the female image in the film study area.

2.1 Angle: Pure, Submissive, Mistress and the Lost Eve

The portrayal of women often shows polarized qualities, namely "angels" and "femme fatale". In the films of the sixth generation directors, female characters are often pure as angels. Women who are angels are often sexually conservative, highly submissive, and strongly submissive to men, while women who are not supported by men often appear as sex workers or sell their sexuality for work while being framed as the culprits of men's misfortune. It seems that in the male subconscious, the female archetype is Eve, made of a male's rib, who is also the one who steals the forbidden fruit and makes Adam punished.

In the films of the sixth generation, directors have used the same actor to play two roles to reflect the two sides of women. In this way, women often present two contrasting images of "angel" and "femme fatale". Between these two images, the "angel" is infinitely preferred.

In *Green Tea*, Wu Fang and Lang Lang are played by the same actress Zhao Wei. Wu Fang has a conservative personality and wears a pair of black-framed glasses, typical of a graduate student, whose interaction with men is limited to blind dates. In *Suzhou River*, Mudan and Mei Mei are played by the same actress Zhou Xun. Mudan is an innocent and lovely young girl who is only a high school student when she meets the male protagonist, Mada, and she falls in love with him after spending time with him. She is simple and naive and trusts Mada a lot. The images of "angels" are non-threatening, submissive, loyal, and moral, as if they are the perfect companion for the male imagination.

The Madwoman in the Attic suggests that "what she sees in the mirror is usually a male construct, the 'pure golden baby' of male brains, a glittering and wholly artificial child". The "angels" in the films of the Sixth Generation directors are like "pure golden baby", with pretty faces and obedience. These images best reflect the phenomenon of women being defined by men, as if they were ribs taken from underneath the director, as obedient Eve, existing for the sake of male existence: "From Eve, Minerva, Sophia and Galatea onward, after all, patriarchal mythology defines women as created by, from, and for men, the children of male brains, ribs, and ingenuity."

2.2 Femme Fatale: Sex, Threat and Sphinx

The opposite of the "angel" image is the "femme fatale". However, in the works of the sixth generation of male directors, the "femme fatale" image often has strong female characteristics. This type of character, is often beautiful in appearance, their makeup, and dress all show their

femininity, while these characters often sell their sexuality for a living. They are as dangerous and seductive as snakes, and they are a threat to the male characters in the film, to pay for the degenerate behavior of men.

In *Suzhou River*, Mei Mei is the opposite of Mudan, the role of the "femme fatale". After years of Mudan's disappearance, Mada unexpectedly meets Mei Mei. He is surprised at how similar Mei Mei is to Mudan in appearance, but at the same time, he is suspicious of the characteristics Mei Mei exhibits. Mei Mei is a mermaid performer, and the men around her are more or less interested in her, while Mei Mei's attire also reveals women's mature and sexy qualities. At the end of the film, the director shows us that Mei Mei and Mudan are not the same people, yet the blurring of their identities in the plot reflects the double-sided expectation of women, hoping that they are pure and flawless, but also hoping that they are sultry and hot.

If the "femme fatale" in *Suzhou River* and *Green Tea* is a romanticized imagination of women, then Feng Yanli in *The Orphan of Anyang* is a realistic depiction. Feng Yanli is a sex worker who accidentally becomes pregnant with a whoremonger. After giving birth to the child, Feng Yanli has no choice but to give the child to someone else to raise. In such a serious film about the layoffs and repressed human nature, it is no coincidence that the female character appears as a sex worker. Lili, who has a small role in *Wushan's Clouds and Rain*, is a sex worker brought in by the main male character's friend, and Yanhong, the heroine of *Luxury Car*, is also a nightclub escort and sex worker. In addition, the hair salon girls in *Ren Xiao Yao* and the hair salon girls like Fang Fang, Li Li, and Qin Qin in *A Touch of Sin* acted as the backdrop for the chaotic background of that chaotic era. Zhao Qiaoqiao in *Ren Xiao Yao* and Xiaoyu in *A Touch of Sin* both play the role of having affairs with married men, and this setting, which breaks through certain moral concepts, reflects the director's thoughts.

In *The Second Sex*, it says that "The only difference between a woman who sells herself through prostitution and a woman who sells herself through marriage is the difference in price and the difference in the length." In the sixth generation of directors, some male directors especially like to portray women with a sense of autonomy as sex workers, regardless of the dignity of sex workers or not, this kind of forced binding of independence and sex can be seen as the director's inferiority complex and self-psychosexuality because this has the personal charm and sense of autonomy of women as prostitutes so that men can easily have sex with them. Dai Jinhua points out that "the female figure becomes the 'empty signify' or the 'imaginary signify' of male history", that is, no matter how attractive or independent such women are in the film, they are still being viewed, the object to be gazed at, the OTHER in the film, the disembodied one who has no right to shape herself.

2.3 Madwomen: Repression, Resistance, and Destruction

It should be noted that in addition to the binary characterization of "angels" and "femme fatale", there is another kind of female character in the works of the sixth generation. They are neither as submissive as the "angels" nor as flattering as the "femme fatale". They are the "madwomen". The "madwomen" often feel repressed under the patriarchal system, and when they try to resist, they are labeled as "madwomen". However, the same behavior in men is described as "resistance to oppression". The very description of "madwomen" is extremely patriarchal. They stigmatize awakening as insanity and use it to suppress women's resistance in order to maintain the functioning of a patriarchal society.

There are several ways to define "madwomen". The first is based on the traditional understanding of "madwomen", which means that they are portrayed as mentally disturbed and uncontrollable women. The second is aggressive women, and the third is women who can effectively threaten the interests of men.

The protagonist Qinghong in the film *Shanghai Dreams* has a mutual love affair with a young man in Guizhou, a province in China, however, under the control of her father, she is not allowed to associate with young men or participate in recreational activities of her peers. In those repressive times, the young man raped Qinghong after learning that he had no hope to be with her and was subsequently sentenced to death, while Qinghong was stimulated to commit suicide. Although the suicide is successfully resuscitated, Qinghong seems mentally disturbed and loses touch with the brilliant life she should have had. In the world shaped by the film, Qinghong suffers a double rape: a physical rape by the young man, and a spiritual rape by the male-dominated society represented by her father. As a young girl in her prime, Qinghong is not allowed to wear brightly colored clothes, play outside with her classmates, or fall in love at an early age. As one small thing after another piles up, Qinghong chooses to resist, and she does so by hurting herself. Qing Hong's sense of autonomy awakens, but she does not allow it to do so. In such a repressive environment, Qinghong chooses to self-destruct and resist the oppression with self-destruction.

In the film *Ren Xiao Yao*, Zhao Qiaoqiao is slapped by her then-boyfriend who relies on her performance for money when she decides to rush out of the bus while trying to escape her life of performance. After being slapped the first time, Zhao Qiaoqiao rushes to the door again, gets slapped again, rushes to the door again, and so on and so forth. In a similar scene in *A Touch of Sin*, the receptionist Xiaoyu is asked to accompany a whoremonger, and Xiaoyu chooses to refuse and is slapped by the man with the money, so the cycle repeats itself again and again in resistance and being slapped. The state of the two characters is like Sisyphus pushing a boulder towards the top of a mountain, resisting again and again and again. This defiant stance is expressed with an almost insane persistence. In their defiance, their faces are grim and seemingly indecent, but in fact, they have a great sense of autonomy, and their "madness" makes them even more unique. Although both films are directed by Jia Zhangke, when faced with such oppression, Zhao Qiaoqiao chooses to accept it, while Xiaoyu chooses to resist to the end, killing the man who forced her to go on the run.

In addition, the "madwomen" image is also presented in the films of the fifth generation directors. The protagonist in *Peacock*, Gao Weihong, is the eldest daughter of a family with three children. In such a turbulent time in China in the 1970s and 1980s, Gao Weihong had a dream of becoming a paratrooper, yet she had no access to her dream for various reasons. She would make her own parachute and pedal her bike to get her off the ground, yet she was treated by her family as mentally deranged and forced to be injected with pharmaceuticals. Her life after that was just like the blue parachute that was extinguished, she became a peacock who could not open her screen. Gao Weihong had many actions that were incomprehensible to the people around her at the time. She was seen as an anomaly, an alien, a woman with an untamable nature, and her eventual fate was not a good one.

Virginia Woolf once said, "Before we women can write, we must 'kill' the angels in the house." The emergence of the "madwoman" shatters the filter of the "angel" image, demonstrates the aggressiveness and aggression of women, and rebels against the dwarfing of women.

2.4 Speechless Women: the Right to Express in the Magic Mirror

In an article, Virginia Woolf hypothesizes that if Shakespeare had a sister with the same talent, would she have been as good a writer as her brother? The answer is no because, in those days, women did not have the right to receive an education and would have been restricted from even going out and being allowed to create literature. The same situation is still happening in the film field. Not only the female characters in films but also the female creators in the film industry and the female audiences in films, are "Shakespeare's sisters" and have difficulties in obtaining the same rights as men.

A point made in *The Madwoman in the Attic* is that there is a classic setting in the famous Snow White fairy tale where the question is asked of the magic mirror, "Am I beautiful?". It is noteworthy that in this fairy tale, the story revolves only around the struggle between Snow White and the wicked queen, while the object of their struggle, the king, seems to be an absent state. Susan and Gilbert, on the other hand, argue that the voice of the magic mirror represents the voice of the king, that is, the king has the right to approve the decision of beauty. Likewise, in the field of film, male opinions occupy the same power of deciding the view of women as the voice in the magic mirror.

Although the works of the sixth generation directors have presented the world with rich images of women, their narratives are often told from the male point of view, inevitably depriving women of their right to speak. The point of view of the entire film *Suzhou River* is the male "I", who does even not appear in the film, but whose voice is used throughout the film to judge the men and women in the whole story. It is also important to note that all of the sixth generation directors are men, which has a significant impact on the portrayal of female characters in the film.

At the same time, in the field of Chinese film creation, there is an imbalance in the ratio of men to women in creative positions such as director, screenwriter, cinematographer, and artist. When female creators in real life are in a state of dissonance, it is inevitable that female characters in films are also in a state of dissonance. Therefore, female audiences receive signals from the "magic mirror" and watch the "angels", "femme fatale" or "madwomen" on the screen. They look at themselves, examine themselves behind the "magic mirror" and think about what they should look like. In the field of cinema, women have always been in a state of "silence".

3 Conclusion

This study takes the works of the sixth generation directors as the research text, and starts from the dualistic characterization of "angel" and "femme fatale", and then introduces the special characterization of "madwoman". The "madwoman" is a special role. The existence of such a character as the "madwoman" is a portrayal of a woman who has awakened to herself, and the manner in which she is portrayed depends on the director's attitude toward this type of woman. In addition to the director's personal tendency, this phenomenon is also caused by the structural gender imbalance in the creative field, so that both the female characters, the female creators, and the female audience lost their right to express their opinions through films, receiving "sage advice" from the men behind the magic mirror.

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