Unveiling the Impact of Female Characters in Asian Chinese Women's Cinema

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Abstracts

This study examines the impact of female characters in Chinese women's cinema, and explores which female character and which ending of the film is more appreciated by audiences. The concepts of Chinese women cinema, female character, media appreciation, open ending, looped ending and closed ending are conducted. A qualitative, semi-structured interviewed is adopted to understand the knowledge of twelve participants towards female character and ending plots of five movies, "Siao Yu" (1998), "The Sent-Down Girl" (1998), "Sister" (2021), "Send Me to the Clouds" (2017) and "Spring Tide" (2019). It concludes that audiences are more appreciative of independent female character, happy closed ending is more likely to be appreciated by audience, tragic looped ending is less likely to be appreciated by audiences, and appreciation of open endings is influenced by the audience's values.

Keywords: Chinese Women Cinema, Female Characters, Media Appreciation.

1. Introduction

This paper highlights the nature of female characters in Chinese women cinema. As

Oliver and Nabi (2004) mention, when audiences choose the specific media contents, it may be due to the enjoyment of the activity. Therefore, this study conducts audiences' media appreciation towards female character and ending plot of Chinese women cinema. A qualitative, semi-structured interview is conducted and the research interviewed twelve participants. It is analyzed that audiences are more appreciative of independent female character and happy closed ending is more likely to be appreciated by audience.

2. Research Questions

1 As for traditional female character, consumer female character, and independent female character, which female character is more appreciated by audiences in Chinese women's cinema?

2 As for open ending, closed ending, and looped ending., which ending is more appreciated by audiences in Chinese women' s cinema?

3. Literature Review

Chinese Women Cinema, Female Character and Media Appreciation

According to Wang (2021), Chinese women's cinema is categorized into three groups: traditional female character, consumer female character, and independent female character. Traditional female character, as wife or mother, is seen to be suppressed specifically in a male- dominated society (Zhang 2019; Yang, 2018). Consumer female character refers to women's femininity, such as appearance and beauty, being commodified for resource exchange (Yang, 2018). Furthermore, independent female character portrays women to pursue their beliefs while seeking their own identity (Williams, 2021). It is stressed that audiences relate themselves to the character based on the degree of understanding or identification towards the character (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). Oliver and Bartsch (2010) mention that media appreciation is highly valued while viewing different female character. Furthermore, it is stressed that media appreciation is embedded deeper meaning perception due to audiences' experience (Maureira & Rombout, 2022).

Open Ending, Looped Ending and Closed Ending

The ending plot of Chinese women's cinema is a response to the audience's expectation. Yan (2020) analyzes 14 Chinese women's cinema filmed by female directors and summarizes endings as three categories: open ending, closed ending, and looped ending.

Open ending refers to the freedom of cinematic time and space construction. As Han (2009) mentions that women's cinema includes two basic directions, one is to reveal the existence of women's unfreedom and criticize power structure which is suppressed, and the other is to imagine the possibility to construct a different kind of cinematic space and time for women's freedom.

Looped ending, specifically tragic ending, is less likely to be appreciated by audiences.

The essence of looped ending is tragedy. Women's movies use such endings to show women's life experiences and destinies that keep looped in the existing environment, they cannot choose or escape from the existing life situation, the female character is trapped in an infinite loop. Compared to the open ending, the looped ending is more pessimistic (Yan, 2020).

Closed ending is the opposite of open ending, and the direction of the story closes at the ending. Specifically, there are often two scenarios, one is from the character's point of view, the woman passively or actively chooses the end their own destiny, so that the story reaches a state of closure. However, compared to closed ending, in open ending, the protagonist does not make an obvious choice. The open ending symbolizes that the "invention" of women's freedom is always a narrative on the way, where the end of each imagination means the occurrence of a new one, and the emergence of each boundary symbolizes the possibility of a new freedom (Han, 2009).

4. Methodology

This research adopted semi-structured interview, a qualitative research, and twelve participants were interviewed. Participants mentioned, five Chinese women's cinema,

"Siao Yu" (1998), "The Sent-Down Girl" (1998), "Sister" (2021), "Send Me to the Clouds" (2017) and "Spring Tide" (2019). According to the descriptions of participants, audiences' perspectives towards traditional, independent, and consumer female characters, nevertheless, audiences' media appreciation towards open, looped, closed endings are examined.

Audiences are more appreciative of independent female character

Participants FB mentioned "Send Me to the Cloud" and stressed the female character, Sheng Nan, is strong as independent character. Furthermore, participant MB took the female character of "Sister" as an example, and portrayed it as 'stubborn' and 'determined'. Nevertheless, participant FC said the female character of "The Sent-Down Girl" is an image of consumer female character and FC had the feelings of sympathy and disappointment towards the character. However, the traditional female character of "Siao Yu" is less appreciated and recognized by audience. Participant FI said that the traditional female character is seen as 'ego-less' and showed less recognition towards this character. As the participants described above, compared to traditional and consumer female characters, independent female character is more appreciated and recognized by audiences.

Closed ending is more likely to be appreciated by audience

Closed ending includes what participants commonly refer to as 'happy' ending and 'tragic' ending. The happy ending is represented by "Sister" and the tragic ending is represented by "The Sent-Down Girl". In "Sister", the female protagonist, An Ran, chooses to raise her brother at the last moment and to reconcile with her loved ones and family. However, when analyzing this ending, different participants gave different opinions, and this opinion mainly places emphasis on whether An Ran's choice of choosing her brother and giving up her ideals was the right choice. As family and work are the main pressures on women, the participants actually used their own values to judge the ending.

Participant FH thought that An Ran's choice was a compromise with reality, which he disagreed with: 'In the end, it was a compromise, a compromise in the face of mainstream pressure. If she had really insisted on her initial thoughts, she should have sold the house and gone to school in Beijing to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor.'

Participant MB was also positive about the ending, believing that such a choice only represents the situation of most women in real life: 'The movie ends with An Ran choosing to give up going to Beijing to raise her brother. I still like this ending because I think it's the most realistic one.'

Participant FC expressed her evaluation towards "The Sent-Down Girl", 'The ending of this movie feels sad, but I like it better because I think for Wenxiu, death is a relief for her.' However, due to the participants' strong empathy with the protagonist and deeper emotional involvement, FC stressed, 'But I wish that if it were up to me, I would have liked the ending of the movie to be a little bit more open…because it felt like the overall tone of the story was too depressing.'

Looped ending, as tragic one, is less likely to be appreciated by audiences

The movie involved in this interview with a looped ending is "Spring Tide". Participant FF stated that 'The ending of this movie, I remember… it doesn't have a very perfect ending, and I think that's just the way it is, most people's stories aren't perfect'. It is less appreciated by participant.

Appreciation of open endings is influenced by the audience's values

The films involved in this interview with open endings were "Siao Yu" and "Send Me to the Clouds". Participant FE commented on the ending of "Siao Yu" and stated 'In the end I think it was hard enough for her to have this heart to come out. It's not easy for her to abandon all her previous concepts and then stop at that place and be able to think. I think that at least that's still quite comforting.' Participant FE was more positive about the woman's progress than the uncertainty of the ending, and stressed:

Even though she didn't make a clear choice, I think at least she's progressing as a person, she's thinking independently, she's realizing herself. I don't know what she's going to do next, and it's probably very painful for her to make any judgment, but, but I feel like the character is actually growing up, growing up towards the kind of stronger, stronger side that I would have preferred to have, and realizing her own value.

Compared to "Siao Yu", "Send Me to the Cloud" is laced with black humor, with relatively low perceived realism, and participants thought relatively little about its ending. Participant MA stated, 'The end of the story made me feel like the character was intentionally built up and made her strong'. Participant FB mentioned, 'The ending is actually more with her own character…being ordinary but strong and still able to resist that pressure.'

5. Conclusion

The study shows that compared to traditional and consumer female characters, independent female character is more appreciated by audiences. The strong and independent female character is recognized. Meanwhile, ego-less traditional

female character is less appreciated, and audiences feel sympathetic and disappointed towards consumer female character. The audience's evaluation appeared to be more diversified, and the audience's judgment towards the endings were mainly influenced by their own values and the perceived realism of the movie. When the ending meets their own expectations, the audience's recognition and appreciation will be strengthened, and vice versa. In general, closed ending, especially happy ending, is more accepted by the audience. Tragic looped ending similar to tragedy bring the audience a higher degree of appreciation. Open ending is more likely to be appreciated by the audience while meeting their expectations due to it is more personalized and generated expectations for the protagonist's attainment.

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