

Emerging Voices: An Analysis of Narrative Structures in Chinese Cinema - A Case Study of Three Female Protagonists

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Abstract:

This article is dedicated to a thorough analysis of the frequently occurring narrative structure of the “three female protagonists” closely associated with the Shanghai Film School in Chinese cinema. This analysis offers a fresh perspective, aiming to provide a historical and cultural background for emerging female screenwriters and directors, enabling them to find their own paths within unique narrative frameworks. Within this space, they can continue to explore, develop, and refine the diversity and complexity of female characters, thereby contributing more to the development of Chinese cinema. The author will discuss the following aspects: firstly, summarizing each historical stage of female narratives in Chinese cinema; secondly, elucidating the current status of female narratives in Chinese cinema to demonstrate the transformation and innovation of female characters. Subsequently, three films from different time periods will be selected for detailed analysis of the three female protagonists and their narrative structures. The final section of the article will offer prospects for the future regarding gender equality and narrative structures.

Keywords:

Narrative Structure, Female Protagonist, Three Female Protagonists

1. Introduction

With the thriving development of the Chinese film industry, film narrative structures are continuously evolving and innovating. This paper aims to analyze the emerging voices in Chinese cinema by selecting three films featuring three female protagonists, namely “The Hours”, “Three Modern Women”, and “Love Myth”, to explore the changes and impacts on narrative structures. The narrative structure of three female protagonists places greater focus on the connection and operation of the dynamic mechanism of “motivation”, enriching the development of a new complete narrative arc that explores more diverse narrative clues and narrative structure patterns (Lawson, 1949). [4] We will delve into how these changes shape the narrative style of the films and the viewing experience of the audience.

2. Female Narrative in Chinese Cinema - History and Current Situation

Over the past few decades, significant changes have occurred in the development of female narrative structures within Chinese cinema. From early silent films to modern high-tech blockbusters, the status and roles of female characters in films have gradually been elevated and deepened.

Adrian Song Xiang in *Hollywood and Shanghai Cinema in the 1930s* offers insights into the different identities of female protagonists in 1930s Chinese cinema, how they reveal the class divisions and contradictions of Chinese society in which women's bodies and fates become a means of social criticism and a vehicle for expressing social ideals. [5] Dai Jinhua, is a leading Chinese film scholar whose writing reflects the impact of China's opening to the outside world in the 1980s and 1990s. She employs Western theories to critique Chinese films, patriarchal society and Western cinematic influence. Jinhua's journal articles, "Invisible Women" (1995) and "Gender and Narration" (2002) provide comprehensive summaries of the development of Chinese women's films from 1949 to 1999. [6,7]

During the era of early silent films, female characters often appeared as mere accompaniments to male characters, their roles primarily serving to fulfill the aesthetic desires of male audiences. Women were typically depicted as weak and submissive, lacking autonomy and independent thinking abilities. During this period, female characters were often confined to the realms of family and marital life, lacking social status and the right to speak. For example, "Goddess" tells the story of a prostitute rejected by society and a virtuous mother's struggle against fate.

The New Culture Movement period marked a significant turning point in the development of Chinese cinema, where female characters began gradually breaking free from traditional constraints and started pursuing their own dreams and careers. During this period, female characters diversified, portraying professionals, intellectuals, and other multifaceted roles. They began to seek freedom and equality, actively participating in social life. Female characters during this period gradually became integral parts of films, with their personalities and autonomy receiving more attention and representation. Cai Chusheng's film "New Women", shot in the 1930s, vividly portrayed the destinies of three women, interpreting the proletarian "revolutionary women's view" of the Leftist period replacing the concept of free women emerging from the May Fourth Movement. This film achieved a forward-looking ideological leap in addressing the issue of modern Chinese women at an artistic level.

After the Reform and Opening Up, the Chinese film market experienced rapid development, and female characters began to receive more attention and respect. With the gradual awakening of female consciousness, an increasing number of female directors and screenwriters started to focus on the fate and circumstances of women. Consequently, the status of female characters in films saw a significant rise. During this period, female characters began to exhibit diversified characteristics. They were not just mere accompaniments to male audiences but indispensable and essential figures in the movies. Films like "Nurse Diary" and "Malan Flower Blooms" celebrated the spirit of women's ability to hold up half the sky, depicting women actively participating in the process of reform and opening up, contributing their own strengths.

In the era of the modern technological explosion, the Chinese film industry has embraced more diversified development opportunities. With the continuous progress of technology and the deepening of female consciousness, the narrative structure of female characters in films has also been enriched with more diverse forms of expression. The portrayal of female characters now emphasizes their personalities, emotions, and psychological dimensions, allowing for a deeper exploration of their inner worlds and emotional experiences. Moreover, female directors and screenwriters are increasingly participating in film production, conveying their care and support for women through their works. For instance, in “The Three-Body Problem”, Ye Wenjie serves as a professor at Tsinghua University, the commander of the ETO, and the mother of Yang Dong. All the events leading to humanity’s destruction are attributed to her. She completes the launch of humanity’s first level II civilization and makes first contact with the Trisolaran civilization. Although she betrays humanity, she also leaves behind a glimmer of hope for its survival.

The evolution of the narrative structure of female characters in Chinese cinema is an ongoing process of development and deepening. From the era of early silent films to the modern age of technological explosion, the status and roles of female characters have gradually been elevated and deepened. Their personalities and autonomy have received more attention and representation. These changes not only reflect the development and progress of Chinese society but also showcase the diversity and inclusivity of Chinese cinema to the world.

3. From Story to Art: The Transformation and Innovation of Female Characters

3.1. From Passive to Active: The Rise of Female Narrative Roles

Female narrative roles in Chinese cinema are gradually rising. From the early male-dominated society to the current emergence of female empowerment, female characters in films are breaking free from subordinate positions to become protagonists or significant supporting roles.

In the past, female characters in Chinese films were often relegated to supporting roles, merely serving as foils to male protagonists or existing as decorative objects to satisfy audience aesthetic preferences. Their roles were passive, lacking their own thoughts and agency, and existing merely as accessories to male characters. However, with the development of society and changing attitudes, more and more women are participating in film production. They are actively shaping their own roles, showcasing their personalities and strengths.

Today, we can see an increasing number of female characters in Chinese films who are no longer mere appendages to male characters but possess their own thoughts and agency. They bravely confront the difficulties and challenges of life, using their wisdom and courage to solve problems. They are no longer passive recipients but active participants, and their stories have become an integral part of cinema.

The rise of female narrative roles is not only a change within the film industry but also a shift in societal attitudes. In traditional societal norms, women were often seen as the weaker party, in need of protection and care from men. However, with the development of society and changing attitudes, people are beginning to realize that women can also have their own life pursuits and career development. This is reflected in films where female characters are no longer passive recipients but rather become

protagonists or significant supporting roles, showcasing women's wisdom and courage.

3.2. Emotional Expression: How Female Narrative Roles Break Traditional Constraints

Capacity for Independent Thinking: We can observe that some female narrative roles have broken through traditional molds. They are no longer confined to the roles of traditional housewives or docile lambs; instead, they have their own careers and interests, possessing the ability for independent thinking and judgment. Such character development not only provides a broader stage for female narrative roles but also renders their emotional expression more genuine and profound. In “The Golden Age,” the struggles and sacrifices of Xu Guangping, the first wife of Lu Xun, during the modern revolution in China, embody the spirit of female independence and social responsibility.



Figure 1. Still from the movie “The Golden Age”.

Taking Initiative to Break Boundaries: The Emotional Expression of Female Narrative Roles has also Undergone Changes. They no longer rely solely on emotional exchanges and transmissions, but express their emotions and attitudes through their own actions and choices. When facing adversity and challenges, they demonstrate resilience and courage, and their growth and progress become important plot points in the film. This mode of emotional expression makes the portrayal of female narrative characters more vivid and multidimensional. Just like Zhou Shuzhen in the film “The Hours”, who actively engages in the struggles for survival and freedom alongside the working masses, they display resilience and bravery when facing adversity and challenges. Their growth and progress also become important plot points in the film. This mode of emotional expression makes the portrayal of female narrative characters more vivid and multidimensional.



Figure 2. Still from the movie “The Hours”.

Resonating with the Audience: The emotional expression of female narrative roles has also drawn attention and discussion from audiences. Their emotional changes and growth have become focal points for audience attention and important elements in the

films. Through the female narrative roles in the movies, audiences see the independence and progress of women, as well as experience the diversity and richness of emotional expression. For example, in the recent hit film “You Only Live Once”, Jia Ling’s portrayal of a female boxer focuses more on the emotional changes and growth of women, not confined to traditional romantic relationships, truly embodying the independence, progress, and self-improvement of women.

The emotional expression of female narrative roles in Chinese cinema has undergone significant changes, with their character development, emotional expression, and influence all being enhanced. These changes not only enrich the diversity of films but also reflect the development and progress of society and culture. We have reason to believe that in the future of Chinese cinema, the emotional expression of female narrative roles will have a broader scope and reach even higher levels.

4. Exploring Narrative Structures through Three Female Protagonists: A Case Study

4.1. Film “The Hours”

The film “The Hours” employs a multi-perspective narrative, integrating the inner worlds, dialogues, and external actions of three characters. This narrative approach allows the audience to understand and empathize with the characters from different perspectives, presenting their personalities and emotions more comprehensively. Compared to traditional single-perspective narratives, multi-perspective storytelling can resonate more with the audience and enhance the depth and breadth of the film.

Virginia Woolf was not only oppressed in life but also deeply suppressed in her innermost being. Through her creation of “Mrs. Dalloway”, she profoundly expressed her yearning for freedom and death. In her conception, she knew she was on the edge of life and death, hoping to break free from constraints and pursue true freedom. Although she ultimately chose suicide, the desire for freedom still shone like a beacon in her heart, illuminating her path forward.

Similarly, Laura Brown, a homemaker in post-World War II Los Angeles, also experienced the helplessness of life and the threat of death. Under the dual pressures of family responsibilities and the love of her children, Laura Brown questioned her life, wondering if her existence was meaningful and if her life truly had value. However, she did not sink into despair. Through the inspiration of “Mrs. Dalloway”, she rediscovered her self-worth and found the meaning of her life. With a positive force, she redefined her life's value, embodying the resilience and strength of this character.

Clarissa Vaughan, brilliantly portrayed by Meryl Streep, lives in bustling New York City of the 1990s, leading a life akin to Mrs. Dalloway’s. On the surface, she seems to have everything: a thriving career, a warm and harmonious family. However, behind this glamorous facade lies a painful secret. In the midst of noisy parties, she assumes the role of Mrs. Dalloway, striving to bring joy to others. Yet deep down, she suffers from loneliness and helplessness. Faced with a crossroads in life, she begins to contemplate her worldview and attitude towards death.

The narrative structure in “Every Moment” embodies themes of women, freedom, and creativity. Through the lives and experiences of three female characters, the film

portrays their struggles and breakthroughs in the face of traditional societal pressures and self-restraint. Their inner worlds and creative processes become the core threads of the film, allowing the audience to deeply understand and empathize with the challenges and struggles of women within social and cultural contexts.

Taking “Mrs. Dalloway” as an example, we can further understand the narrative structure of “Every Moment”. “Mrs. Dalloway” revolves around time, depicting the protagonist's experiences and emotions throughout a single day, showcasing her struggles between societal pressures and personal pursuits. Similarly, “Every Moment” also uses time as a narrative thread, depicting the lives and emotional changes of three female characters to drive the narrative forward. The similarities in narrative structure between the two works demonstrate the influence of Woolf's themes and narrative techniques on contemporary cinema.

The three female protagonists in “The Hours” showcase outstanding narrative structures, utilizing multi-perspective storytelling, the interweaving of time and space, character interactions, and visual elements to depict the challenges and struggles of women within societal and cultural contexts. These characteristics make the film lively, engaging, and deeply captivating, profoundly appealing to the audience.

4.2. Movie “Three Modern Women”

In the theory of Jacques Lacan, a French structuralist psychoanalyst, there is a phenomenon known as the “non-existence of woman”, which reveals various stereotypes about women, such as the saint or the magician, all of which stem from gender norms prescribed by men over thousands of years. This phenomenon has not only had a profound impact in France but also globally. In China, some early classical films used the setting of three female protagonists as a means to showcase different life choices and encounters. Among them, a typical film titled “Three Modern Women”, directed by Bu Wancang and written by Han Tian, was filmed in 1933. The film presents three different modern women, each representing distinct life paths and values. Through their stories, we can see the expectations and limitations placed on women by Chinese society. Only one of the three female characters shaped in the film is accepted by mainstream society, and that is Zhou Shuzhen, who chooses to pursue progress in society.



Figure 3. Still from the movie “Three Modern Women”.

Let's take a look at the experience of the first female protagonist. The male protagonist, university student Zhang Yu, discontent with arranged marriage in his family, flees from his hometown in Northeast China to Shanghai, immerses himself in the film industry, and stars in multiple romantic films, becoming a young idol. After being rejected in marriage, Zhou Shuzhen does not give up on herself. Instead, following the fall of Northeast China, she flees with her mother to the government-

controlled areas, joins the Shanghai Telephone Company as a switchboard operator, and actively participates in nursing work during the anti-Japanese resistance. In that era, women were usually confined to their homes, but she bravely ventured into the outside world. Her choice undoubtedly challenged traditional notions and elevated the status of women. After the war, Zhou Shuzhen, tempered by life's struggles, has grown into a proletarian warrior. Confronting public ridicule from Yu Yuxi, she eloquently defends herself, stunning everyone present. The portrayal of Zhou Shuzhen, who actively engages in the struggles for survival and freedom of the laboring masses, had a significant impact on the intellectual world of young people at the time. The film also affirms and praises Zhou Shuzhen's self-reliance and proactive pursuit of spiritual growth, making her a positive and upward-facing character.

Next is the second female character, Ms. Yu Yu, who indulges in a lavish lifestyle with fashionable clothes, cars, and mansions, reveling in extravagance, pleasure-seeking with the male protagonist Zhang Yu, and pursuing a bourgeois decadent lifestyle. Immersed in material pleasures, she neglects spiritual pursuits, leading herself into moral decay, emptiness, and despair. In the latter part of the film, Ms. Yu deliberately invites Zhang Yu and Shuzhen to a banquet, where she publicly ridicules Shuzhen. This character is diametrically opposed to the revolutionary spirit advocated at the time and was heavily criticized by mainstream society. Such a character setup prompts one to reflect on the relationship between material enjoyment and spiritual pursuit. Excessive pursuit of materialism may lead to self-loss, emptiness, and despair.

Finally, the third female character, Chen Ruoying, is portrayed as immersed in petit bourgeois sentimentality and despair, her inner world filled with deep admiration for the male protagonist Zhang Yu. To express this love, she travels from a small town in Jiangnan to bustling Shanghai just to get closer to Zhang Yu. Although Zhang Yu does not reciprocate her feelings, Chen Ruoying's infatuation does not diminish. She continues to cling to her love for Zhang Yu, relentlessly pursuing him and willing to do anything for him. In desperation, Zhang Yu agrees to co-star in a film with her as a commemoration of their friendship. However, during the filming process, Chen Ruoying unexpectedly succumbs to a state of genuine emotional expression and tragically sacrifices herself for love. This tragic ending is a result of her own tragic nature, sharply contrasting with the progressive and positive image of the female lead Shuzhen. She chooses self-destruction, revealing her inner fear and helplessness. The film criticizes this passive attitude toward life, reflecting the complexity and multifaceted nature of human beings.

The portrayal of these three female characters in the film is not merely descriptive but also serves as a critique and reflection of the social context at the time. Through their different identities and experiences, we can see the class differentiation and contradictions in Chinese society. The bodies and destinies of these three female characters become a means of social critique and expression of societal ideals. Such changes are worth celebrating because they signify the elevation of women's status and the amplification of women's voices. However, we must also realize that such changes do not happen overnight. They require the efforts and support of each and every one of us. We need more women to participate in various fields of work, more media coverage of women's stories, and more artistic works such as films, TV dramas, and novels to showcase the diversity and complexity of women. Only in this way can we truly achieve social equality and justice.

4.3. Movie "Love Myth"

The movie “Love Myth” has won the audience’s love with its unique perspective and deeply touching character portrayals. Among them, three female characters have become key elements of the film, each with their unique personalities and storylines, showcasing the inclusivity of the city while reflecting the individuality brought by lifestyle differences, collectively constructing the film’s narrative structure. Next, the author will conduct an in-depth analysis of how the film uses female characters to drive the narrative and showcase the charm of its narrative artistry.

The narrative structure of “Love Myth” is unique and layered, constructing a complete story world through the portrayal of three female characters. Miss Li, a woman in the literary drama, is a middle-aged woman hurt by love, living in her mother’s old house and raising her daughter alone. Despite the trauma of marriage, her heart is still filled with longing and anticipation for love. She is highly capable at work and striking in appearance, but as time passes, she begins to feel the pressure of aging. In the trivialities of life and the harshness of her mother, Miss Li feels exhausted and helpless. Late at night, she can only light a cigarette and gaze out the window alone, feeling melancholic. She understands that she and Lao Bai are not from the same world; what she longs for is a soulmate who can understand her spiritual world, while Lao Bai only sees her as a perfect companion.

Beibei, the woman who used to be Lao Bai’s ex-wife, has been divorced for ten years, yet when she enters Lao Bai’s home, she still acts like the mistress. Such a scene inevitably makes one imagine that their previous marriage may have been a case of a strong woman and a weak man. If it weren’t for a matter of principle, Lao Bai might never have had the courage to divorce. From my speculation, perhaps they got married in the first place because Beibei was attracted to the artistic atmosphere of Lao Bai, who was an art teacher. However, after entering into marriage, Lao Bai gradually lost that love, perhaps seeking some so-called love from others. When Beibei learned to dance tango, she was scorned by Lao Bai. She may have said, “You never really understood me all these years.” Yes, actions have consequences, and their divorce may be the result of this. However, after ten years, she has not formed a new family yet and still maintains a relationship with her former mother-in-law. This may be because Beibei herself has not completely severed ties with Lao Bai and harbors illusions. However, she must also face reality, let go of the past, and start a new life. We cannot judge her right or wrong; we can only hope that she can soon step out of the shadows of the past and embrace a new life.

Gloria, with leisure time and abundant wealth, feels emotionally empty. She appears carefree on the outside but deeply desires to meet a “good man”. In her eyes, a “good man” is someone honest, capable of cooking well, and taking care of others, and to her, Lao Bai fits this description. She compares herself to a stray cat, finishing leftovers and then running off, a sentiment that Lao Wu agrees with. She believes that women, like cats, long to be adopted and cared for. Lao Bai gives her a sense of home, a sense of belonging that money cannot buy. Gloria is a character full of contradictions; she desires to be cared for yet displays an independent attitude. Deep down, however, she yearns for a man who can truly understand, care for, and cherish her. And Lao Bai is the man she has been waiting for.

Through an analysis of the narrative structure of the three female characters, Miss Li, Beibei, and Gloria, in “Love Myth”, we can appreciate the subtlety of character development and plot arrangement in the film. These three female characters not only enrich the storyline but also deepen and diversify the emotional expression of the film.

Their character development and narrative structure complement each other, delving into the multiple roles and emotional experiences of women in life. This prompts viewers to reflect on life and resonate with it, collectively creating a deeply emotional and unique film.



Figure 4. "Love Myth" Movie Poster.

This article selects three classic films with three female protagonists in chronological order to delve into the stories of women living in different historical backgrounds, further exploring the shaping of female characters, their internal contradictions and conflicts, and the significance they carry in the stories. Post-World War II, the film "The Hours" depicts the struggles and breakthroughs of three female characters facing traditional societal pressures and self-restraint. Following that is the 1930s film "Three Modern Women", which celebrates freedom and struggle while criticizing decadence and indulgence. Lastly, we delve into the inner world and self-pursuit of modern women in contemporary life. We will focus on the role changes of female protagonists under specific historical conditions and how they gradually gain self-awareness and identity recognition in this process, which is the core thread of our discussion. Through this research, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of the inner world of women and attempt to extract insights into the shaping of female characters and the rise of female consciousness in modern society.

5. Looking to the Future — Possibilities of Gender Equality and Narrative Structure

Chinese cinema has made significant progress over the past few decades, especially in exploring the narrative structure of female characters. Many films have begun to focus on women's lives, emotions, and stories, which is undoubtedly a positive trend. However, we must also acknowledge that there are still some problems in the current film market and narrative structure, such as the stereotypical portrayal and marginalization of female characters. This not only limits the space for the portrayal and development of female roles but also affects the audience's acceptance of films.

The future of Chinese cinema has tremendous potential in terms of the narrative structure of female characters. We need more female filmmakers to participate in film production, and their perspectives and experiences will bring new vitality and depth to films. We need to delve deeper into the real-life situations and challenges faced by women in various aspects such as society, family, and profession, breaking stereotypes and showcasing the diverse faces of women. At the same time, we also need to focus on women's inner worlds, exploring their inner conflicts and growth journeys to present the vitality and diversity of women more comprehensively.

Gender equality is one of the core values of film art and a goal we should pursue. To achieve this goal, we need to break stereotypes of gender roles, allowing character development to be closer to real human nature rather than based on predetermined gender categories. We also need to delve deeper into women's inner worlds, showcasing their unique charm and strength. Only in this way can we truly achieve gender equality and make films an art form that everyone can appreciate and benefit from.

The author is confident about the future of Chinese cinema regarding the narrative structure of female characters. I believe that as long as we persist in promoting the idea of gender equality, focusing on the real-life situations of women, and exploring their diversity and strength, more films with depth, influence, and artistic value will continue to emerge.

6. Conclusions

Through the analysis of narrative structures in Chinese cinema, we have explored the unique charm of Chinese films using three examples. The narrative structures in Chinese cinema are diverse and rich. By delving into the stories of three female protagonists in each film, we have witnessed the distinct allure of Chinese cinema in terms of narrative structure. Chinese cinema has made significant progress in narrative structure. The stories of these female protagonists not only showcase the narrative skills of Chinese cinema but also reflect the realities and values of Chinese society. Looking ahead, we hope that Chinese cinema will continue to innovate and break new ground in narrative structure, bringing audiences more profound and meaningful works.

Conflicts of Interest

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