

The Ugly Duckling and the Swan: Paradox in Asian Romantic Comedy

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Abstract. This paper aims to explore the beauty logic and gender power structure in the feminine growth narrative of Asian romantic comedies. Taking the South Korean drama True Beauty and the Chinese drama The Pretty Li Hui Zhen as text objects, the study uses qualitative analysis to examine the relationship between the female protagonist's appearance change and self-growth, the influence of male evaluation on female confidence in romantic relationships, and the shaping of power structure by the gender difference between the male and female protagonists. The findings show that feminine growth narrative in these dramas highly relies on beauty capital and male recognition, superficially emphasizing confidence and self-worth realization, however, actually reinforcing social aesthetic standards and patriarchal structures, which leads to a structural paradox. This analysis not only enriches the research on gender and aesthetics from a unique view by looking at Asian romantic comedies, but also reveals the paradoxical messages behind medias, which advocate for broader freedoms and possibilities across genders.

Keywords: Asian romantic comedy, female growth narrative, beauty capital, patriarchy, and feminist media study

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In this study, the term “paradox” refers to a contradictory phenomenon: although True Beauty and The Pretty Li Hui Zhen seemingly advocate for female confidence and self-acceptance, the narratives actually reveal that the heroine's growth, social recognition, and self-realization largely depend on the improvement of appearance and the validation of male characters. This dependency suggests that the so-called “empowerment” is not entirely autonomous but constrained by aesthetic norms, gender expectations, and patriarchal structures. In other words, the heroine's growth is framed by external evaluation and the logic of romantic relationships, which may reinforce narrow beauty standards, deepen women's reliance on external recognition, and prevent women from independently constructing self-worth in real life. This paradox sheds light on the tension between the “poetical illusion” of the romantic comedy narratives and the “structural control” of reality.

In contemporary Asian pop culture, romantic comedy series often center around the growth and empowerment of a female protagonist. Particularly, Korean and Chinese romantic comedy

productions can be influential in shaping societal perceptions of beauty, gender roles, and emotional relationships. This study selected two representative shows: *True Beauty* (South Korea) and *The Pretty Li Hui Zhen* (China) to analyze how they construct narratives of female self-acceptance and confidence.

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to systematically analyze the operation of beauty capital, male gaze, gender performance, and power structure of intimacy in female coming-of-age narratives in romantic comedy. The study, which combines academic frameworks such as the beauty myth [1], post-feminist theory [2], gender performance theory [3], male gaze theory [4], and theory of relational power structure [5], aims to uncover the patriarchal norms, beauty logic, and gender inequality implicit in the narrative and analyze how these cultural productions subtly influence the audience's perceptions of women's self-worth, appearance, and gender roles. This study not only focuses on the superficial entertainment narrative of the plot but also digs into its socio-cultural implications, providing theoretical support and a critical perspective for understanding the relationship between female growth and gender logic in contemporary Asian popular culture.

In an era when information dissemination is so advanced, romantic comedies serve not only as a form of entertainment but also as a powerful tool for spreading gender norms and values. As a result, the effect of this study can be significant. By systematically analyzing the relationship between beauty capital, male identification, and the structure of gender power in the narratives of female protagonists, it reveals the implicit patriarchal logic and aesthetic constraints in film and television texts, providing a new analytical perspective for feminist media studies. Moreover, modern women are often influenced by appearance evaluations and social expectations in real life. This study helps to understand how these film and television narratives subtly reinforce or reproduce gender norms, which promotes the advancement of gender ideas and the generation of more inspiring media narratives about females in the future.

Existing literature often focuses on theoretical levels or analysis of a text, lacking a cross-cultural and systematic analysis of the structural contradictions in female growth narratives in film and television. This study fills this gap by comparing two popular drama series from South Korea and China.

1.2. Research questions

This study aims to explore the structural paradox of women's growth narratives in Asian romantic comedies, with specific research questions:

- What is "beauty" depicted by the series?
- What role does beauty play in the narratives of women's growth?
- To what extent does female self-identity and confidence development depend on external evaluation?
- How do the differences between male and female protagonists influence the power structure and female's growth in the drama?
- How do these narratives of growth reflect the gender power structure and social norm constraints underlying the apparent empowerment of women?

2. Literature review

In the study of female growth and beauty, scholars have proposed a variety of theoretical frameworks, providing a solid basis for the analysis of film and television texts.

The concept of symbolic capital [6] suggests that beauty can be a social resource that generates advantages in interpersonal interactions, career development, and social recognition [7,8]. The effects of beauty capital can be significant in the short term, but its influence has limitations over time or with environmental changes [9]. This perspective provides a basis for understanding why women in social-cultural contexts value appearance as an expression of self-worth.

In terms of female self-identity and body practice, self-objectification theory suggests that women tend to evaluate their own value through the "gaze of the other," making their self-identification dominated by external standards [10]. Postfeminist choice theory highlights that even when women seemingly autonomously change their appearance, their behavior is actually constrained by social aesthetic norms, which demonstrates the tension between autonomous choice and social discipline [2]. Gender performance theory further explains how women perform repeatedly through makeup, dress, and behavior norms to conform to the socially recognized feminine image, indicating that the shaping of appearance is a gendered social practice rather than a natural behavior [3].

Gender power relations in film and television texts are also important issues in relevant research. Male gaze theory proposes that the value of female characters is often defined by a male perspective, which reinforces the hierarchical relationship "Man as subject, Woman as object" [4]. Heterosexual script theory suggests that behavioral patterns in romantic relationships are influenced by cultural presuppositions, in which men should be active pursuers, and women ought to be responders [11]. Discipline theory provides a macro framework for understanding the power distribution in intimate relationships, revealing how social norms shape individual identities and behaviors [12]. Patriarchal culture perspective points out that the structure of male action and female endurance persists in society and intimate relationships, providing theoretical support for the analysis of gender logic in film and television works [5].

In summary, the existing literature provides a rich theoretical foundation for the analysis of female growth narratives, including beauty capital, self-objectification, gender performance, male gaze, and relational power structures. However, these studies mostly remain at the theoretical or empirical level, lacking systematic analysis of the structural paradox between female growth narratives, dependence on appearance, and male recognition in film and television texts. This research gap provides the theoretical basis and research space for this article, that is, by qualitative analysis of Asian romantic comedies, to explore the structural constraints and gender power behind the superficial empowerment of female growth.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method, focusing primarily on close textual readings and content analysis of two Asian romantic comedy series—South Korean series *True Beauty* and Chinese drama *The Pretty Li Hui Zhen*. These two dramas were chosen because of their current popularity and representativeness. They revolve around the transformation and growth of female appearance, aligning with the gender and aesthetics issues that this study focuses on.

Specifically, I focused on the process of the female protagonist's appearance changes in school and work environments, such as makeup and image transformation, and how these changes affect their self-identity and others' evaluation. At the same time, I analyzed the emotional interaction between the male and female protagonists, exploring how their relationships are established and how the female protagonist's "growth" and "confidence" are encouraged by the recognition and support of the male character. In the process of analysis, I repeatedly watched the relevant plots, took notes, and marked key lines and scenes, extracting themes such as "the beauty empowerment"

and "the emotional dependence paradox" in combination with feminist and cultural criticism theories.

This research emphasizes detailed textual interpretation, focuses on contextual relevance, and strives to deeply explore the cultural and social structural significance behind the plot. The study is also supplemented by relevant academic literature as theoretical support to ensure that the analysis is well-founded.

In terms of ethics, this research is only based on publicly aired video and television texts, without involving real-life interviews or personal privacy information. Therefore, there is no ethical risk. In the course of the research, I strictly followed academic norms, respected the copyright of video works, and ensured that all references were legal and compliant, reflecting academic integrity.

4. Analysis

4.1. The role of beauty capital in female self-development

In *True Beauty*, Lim Ju-kyung is bullied for her appearance, such as "thick eyebrows," "acne-prone skin," and "black framed glasses," at her original school. After transferring, she changes her appearance with makeup and is immediately hailed as a "goddess" by her classmates on the first day of school. The plot clearly presents a direct correlation between appearance and social acceptance: rejected in the past for being "ugly," she quickly gains friendship and respect for being "beautiful." Similarly, in *The Pretty Li Hui Zhen*, Li Hui Zhen had previously won the recognition of colleagues and superiors through diligent study and professional accumulation, a process that could be seen as her personal growth and subjectivity formation. However, after experiencing dismissal and return, the narrative arranges her to re-enter the workplace with appearance changes, stunning everyone around her. Stories of both female leads imply that narratives of women's growth are often closely linked to appearance improvement.

From a theoretical perspective, this phenomenon is consistent with the concept of beauty capital [6]. Beauty can be seen as a form of symbolic capital that brings social recognition, opportunities, and interpersonal advantages [7].

However, it is worth noting that its effect will diminish over time [8]. That is, beauty capital, while powerful, is limited in its efficacy. The emphasis on women's appearance in the series is, in fact, a result of social discipline: cultural norms constrain individual corporeal practices through aesthetic demands and behavioral standards, aligning them with social expectations [12]. The series reinforces the importance of beauty capital without depicting its limited and constrained nature. If women in real life rely too heavily on beauty capital for social recognition, they may be guided to invest substantial time and energy into the cultivation of secondary abilities, at the expense of neglecting real capacity development [9]. This reveals a paradox: while emphasizing self-growth and the realization of self-worth, it closely binds women's subjectivity with appearance evaluation, making the growing process dependent on social recognition and aesthetic norms.

4.2. The constrained self under social aesthetic expectations

In both series, the protagonists' natural features—Li Hui Zhen's curly hair, freckles, and teeth, as well as Lim Ju-kyung's skin condition, thick eyebrows, and glasses—are repeatedly presented as symbols of "ugliness" in the narrative. To advance the plot, these natural traits are established as flaws that must be corrected. The so-called "becoming beautiful" is often achieved through methods such as straightening hair, learning makeup, taking off glasses, and engaging in fashion practices.

The protagonists first experience self-objectification [10], evaluating themselves through the “gaze of others,” which causes their self-identity to be kidnapped by external standards. Their natural features are negatively evaluated by society, thus becoming “mistakes” that must be modified. This phenomenon also echoes the theory of postfeminist choice, where women are constrained by social aesthetic norms while seemingly autonomously choosing to alter their appearance [2]. Additionally, the theory of gendered performance posits that makeup and appearance shaping are not innate behaviors for women but repetitive performances that conform to the socially recognized image of femininity [3].

Although the ultimate narratives of both dramas intend to convey the values of breaking stereotypes and striving for self-approval, the so-called “transformation” of the protagonists actually relies heavily on external evaluations and social norms rather than real self-acceptance. While the plots attempt to emphasize women’s growth and confidence, they otherwise reinforce the social hegemonic standard of beauty.

4.3. Male Gaze: dependence of female confidence on romantic recognition

In *True Beauty*, Lim Ju-kyung’s process of obtaining confidence is not driven solely by self-discovery but is heavily influenced by Su-ho’s love and affirmation. Su-ho constantly emphasizes that “it makes no difference to me whether you wear makeup or not” and “you are pretty,” largely enhancing the heroine’s confidence. Even when she first appears bare-faced at school, the way she demonstrates bravery is through claiming “I am Su-ho’s girlfriend, so what?”, using the relationship with the most popular boy in school to prove the so-called self-identity.

The same logic is also present in *The Pretty Li Hui Zhen*. When a childhood friend, who has not seen her in many years, mistakes her more beautiful friend for Hui Zhen, Hui Zhen does not clarify in time, but instead constantly doubts herself, no longer worthy of the other party’s favor. Both dramas present how women’s evaluation of their self-worth is based on men’s attitudes and reactions.

This narrative logic reveals the structural dependence of female empowerment on heterosexual identity. The “confidence” of Lim Ju-kyung and Li Hui Zhen is not obtained through autonomous self-realization, but is ultimately “confirmed” by the male protagonist’s affection. This pattern embodies what Mulvey [4] terms the “male gaze”: women’s visibility and value are primarily defined through men’s gaze, thus reinforcing the hierarchical relationship of “men as subjects, and women as objects.” At the same time, the “ugly” image of the female protagonist is constructed as a kind of “otherness,” symbolizing social and marginalized identity. Only through physical makeover and acceptance in a romantic relationship can they return to a “normalized” female identity. In other words, romance is not a means of self-liberation, but part of the heterosexual power structure [11] that shapes the romantic relationship as the ultimate proof of self-worth.

This pattern essentially undermines the subjectivity of women in their self-growth. The male character is assigned excessive narrative power and becomes a crucial “other” in the female character’s journey to growth. The female protagonists conceal their true selves due to the fear of the male lead’s disappointment and gain confidence through his approval. In this process, self-evaluation and sense of value are not completely in the hands of women themselves, but are placed under the dominance of male discourse. So-called “female growth” is thus encoded as a form of dependency and obedience, rather than independence and resistance.

4.4. Patriarchal power dynamics in romantic relationships

In *True Beauty* and *The Pretty Li Hui Zhen*, the male and female protagonists exhibit distinct gender differences: the female leads are often portrayed as kind, innocent, and helpful, with their value mainly reflected in their softness and empathy; while the male leads hold a higher social status and achievement. Su-ho in *True Beauty* is an outstanding student with excellent academic performance, and Bai Haoyu in *The Pretty Li Hui Zhen* is the boss. This naturally creates an unequal distribution of social resources and discourse power between the two genders.

The romantic relationship mainly relies on the male lead. The emotional development is usually initiated by the male lead: initially cold or critical, but gradually discovering the unique charm of the female lead and actively expressing affection. Namely, the romantic relationship is established by the male lead's choice, while the female lead only needs to maintain her "innocence and kindness." This pattern reinforces the passive position of women. Even if the female lead harbors feelings, her primary reaction is often self-doubt rather than active pursuit. The pace and direction of the relationship are determined by the male lead: when he approaches, the female lead gains happiness; when he distances, she passively bears the setbacks.

This phenomenon can be understood through Power Structure and Heterosexual Script Theory. Relational power theory points out that the party that holds the decision-making power directly influences the behavior and psychological state of both [12]. Heterosexual script theory emphasizes that culture prescribes men as pursuers and women as responders, thus maintaining gender differences [11]. In the dramas, the female lead's emotions and behaviors are clearly regulated by the male lead's attitude, which directly embodies this logic.

Therefore, the subjectivity of women is restricted by the external relational framework, and their confidence can hardly be independently formed. This male domination not only weakens the agency of women in intimate relationships but also re-consolidates the inherent structure of "men act, women endure" in patriarchal culture [5].

5. Conclusion

Through a qualitative analysis of *True Beauty* and *The Pretty Li Hui Zhen*, this article finds that the narratives of female growth are closely related to beauty capital and male validation. The heroine's changes in appearance are not only a means of self-expression but also become a prerequisite for social acceptance and romantic success; confidence and the sense of self-worth depend heavily on male evaluation rather than originating entirely from a self-determined identity. The gendered difference between the male and female protagonists further reinforces a patriarchal structure of relationships that limits female subjectivity.

This narrative, which purports to emphasize confidence and growth but in fact stresses aesthetic standards and patriarchal structures, reflects a structural paradox in Asian romantic comedy: women's growth is bound with appearance and male validation rather than being truly independent.

The value of this study lies in its theoretical contribution, practical significance, and methodological innovation. Theoretically, it systematically analyzes the operational mechanism of beauty capital, male, and gender power structure in women's growth narratives, revealing the patriarchal logic and aesthetic constraints implicit in film and television texts, and provides a new analytical perspective for media research. Practically, given the contemporary situation that women are often influenced by appearance evaluations and social expectations, this study helps to understand how film and television culture subtly forces or reproduces gender norms, providing references for women's education, media literacy training, and gender equality advocacy.

Methodologically, by cross-culturally comparing Korean dramas with Chinese dramas, this study fills the gap in existing literature that lacks a systematic analysis of the structural contradictions in women's growth narratives and provides an example of the application of qualitative content analysis in a cross-cultural context.

Future research directions can be expanded from various aspects. Future studies may include diverse genres of women's growth narratives across different cultural backgrounds to explore how cultural variations shape women's self-identity and gender cognition. Moreover, audience reception and interpretation shall be taken into account: further investigation into audience feedback mechanisms can shed light on how viewers perceive beauty, logic, and gender power structures in media texts. Future research may also examine how multi-dimensional social factors (such as class, education, and occupation) intersect with women's growth in television narratives, thereby providing richer references for both theoretical construction and practical advocacy.

Overall, this study not only reveals the structural paradox of women's growth narratives in film and television texts but also provides methodological references for understanding the potential impact of modern culture on the shaping of female subjectivity, and provides an expandable space for future cross-cultural and cross-media feminist research.

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