

Reconstructing Motherhood in Chinese-Language Cinema: Absence, Idealization, and Negotiation Within the Cultural Tensions of Modern Chinese Family Life

Xinyuan Zhang

*College of Liberal Arts, Guangzhou Huashang College, Guangzhou, China
eagertobecuddle@outlook.com*

Abstract. In Chinese-language cinema, maternal figures have long been depicted through ideals of self-sacrifice and unwavering devotion, reflecting cultural expectations of the "good mother". These portrayals, deeply rooted in traditional kinship ethics, often position women as both moral and emotional anchors within the family. However, the rise of feminist critique and rapid changes in family structures have contributed to increasingly diverse cinematic representations of mothers. On screen, mothers are now depicted with personal desires, internal contradictions, and vulnerabilities, particularly in narratives exploring mother-daughter relationships. Rather than following linear trajectories of conflict or sacrifice, these bonds are portrayed as dynamic, reciprocal, and emotionally nuanced. This paper examines *Eat Drink Man Woman*, *Hi, Mom*, and *Her Story* through close textual reading in dialogue with gender theory. It identifies three recurring maternal typologies--absence, idealization, and negotiation--each corresponding to distinct modes of mother-daughter interaction and highlighting broader cultural tensions such as the substitution of maternal functions, the disciplining of affect, and the reshaping of intimacy. Rather than proposing a singular resolution, this paper demonstrate that maternal representation in Chinese-language cinema is historically situated, emotionally layered, and open to ongoing cultural debate rather than bound by a single framework.

Keywords: mother-daughter relations, maternal representation, gendered regulation, Chinese-language cinema, affective negotiation

1. Introduction

Family-centered narratives dominate Chinese-language cinema, frequently placing mothers at the heart of emotional and moral life. Yet conventional depictions often reduce mother-daughter relationships to simplified patterns of sacrifice or conflict, obscuring the complex, historically situated, and relational nature of these ties. In reality, mother-daughter interactions are central to women's lived experiences and provide crucial insight into how emotion, agency, and power circulate across domestic and social spaces [1].

Recent decades have witnessed a shift in gender norms, family structures, and intergenerational expectations, which has encouraged filmmakers to explore a more heterogeneous range of maternal

roles. These newer representations prompt closer scholarly attention to the cultural meanings of motherhood--not solely as a locus of intimacy but also as a site of social regulation, ethical expectation, and emotional negotiation.

This paper situates *Eat Drink Man Woman*, *Hi, Mom*, and *Her Story* within their historical and narrative contexts. Each film foregrounds a different maternal formation: in *Eat Drink Man Woman*, the mother's absence and the father's reluctant assumption of caregiving destabilize traditional patterns; in *Hi, Mom*, a time-travel premise reimagines the mother as an idealized figure shaped by cultural codes of devotion; while *Her Story* portrays a single mother whose daily negotiations reveal maternal subjectivity and relational agency. Collectively, these works illuminate the evolving representation of motherhood in contemporary Chinese-language cinema, emphasizing its relational, flexible and socially embedded character.

2. Absent mothers and the paternal reconfiguration of maternal labor

In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, the early death of the mother produces not only a narrative void but also a structural rupture within the family. Lao Zhu, the father, is compelled to undertake tasks conventionally associated with motherhood, including maintaining family rituals, preserving emotional bonds, and providing moral guidance. The dining table, long a site of domestic routine, becomes a symbolic locus for observing the recalibration of family roles.

Meals in the film carry multiple layers of meaning: they sustain the family physically, expose latent conflicts, and provide moments for emotional repair. Lao Zhu's meticulous culinary preparations, paired with understated questions such as the recurring "Can you eat this?", reveal the subtle ways in which paternal enactment of maternal functions is performed. His response to Jia-Qian's question--"I have always done my best"--exemplifies both vulnerability and determination embedded in this paternal caregiving. Following Miller's observation that domestic spaces and objects convey affective meaning, the kitchen and shared meals in *Eat Drink Man Woman* function as material mediators of emotional labor, illustrating how maternal roles can be redistributed and symbolically embodied by a father [2]. Croll further shows that in contemporary Chinese families, the role of fathers in partial motherhood is not completely fictional, but a practical reflection of the family structure under social changes [3]. Curtiss also emphasizes that shared family meals are not only a field of material supply, but also carry important cultural significance for child development and family happiness [4].

The narrative structure aligns with Todorov's disruption-restoration model [5]. The disruption manifests through silences and unspoken tension at the family table, reflecting the absence of maternal guidance. In the Chinese context, food carries emotional as well as physical significance, symbolizing care, cohesion, and cultural continuity. Restoration emerges not through the mother's return but through the gradual recalibration of father-daughter relationships: Jia-Qian's recognition of her father's intentions, Jia-Ning's assertion of autonomy, and Lao Zhu's willingness to release control collectively illustrate the adaptability of maternal labor within the family unit. Schmidt's concept of fluidity in maternal norms is exemplified here: motherhood functions less as a static category and more as a negotiated, evolving form of emotional labor responsive to familial circumstances [6].

3. Idealized maternal archetypes and the affective governance of filial narratives

Hi, Mom constructs an idealized maternal image through a time-travel premise, in which the daughter, Jia Xiaoling, encounters her mother, Li Huanying, as a young woman. The narrative is

structured around affective repair, portraying a selfless, cheerful, and enduring mother whose devotion appears both naturalized and culturally codified. Chodorow emphasizes that such idealizations are socially constructed, reflecting broader gendered expectations for maternal behavior [7].

Ahmed's notion of affective "stickiness" illuminates how repeated acts attach emotions to objects and gestures [8]. In the film, material culture--such as the television, volleyball match, and matchmaking events--operates as a conduit for maternal devotion. Jia Xiaoling's efforts to secure her mother the first television at the factory, her collaborative training for the volleyball match, and her facilitation of her mother's social experiences transform everyday actions into markers of moral and emotional propriety. Miller further underscores that domestic objects can transmit cultural meanings, situating routine behaviors as carriers of relational and moral expectation [2]. These activities simultaneously reinforce the idealized maternal template and convey warmth, illustrating the dual function of maternal labor as both ethical guidance and cultural performance.

While the film provides emotional resolution, it also frames maternal roles in restrictive terms. The film praises generosity, yet leaves little space for a mother's own choices or inner depth. What comes through instead is the ongoing pull between idealization and personal subjectivity. Li Huanying comes across above all as hopeful and enduring, someone whose quiet strength and repeated acts of giving map neatly onto familiar cultural codes of femininity.

4. The negotiable mother: iterative intersections of everyday affects

In *Her Story*, Wang Tiemei comes across as a mother whose way of caring changes with the situation, rather than fitting neatly into the familiar "anxious mother" figure driven by pressure or emotional manipulation. She pays close attention to her daughter Moli, yet she is not afraid to take a step back, leaving room for distance when it feels healthier. This shifting rhythm makes her relationship neither rigidly disciplinary nor overly sentimental. What stands out is a kind of flexibility that grows out of her particular context--gendered expectations, the burden of single parenthood, and the lack of reliable support around her. The film hints at this through small but telling details: Tiemei encourages Moli's interest in drumming, joins her only in certain moments, and at the same time keeps the household and neighborhood running. When her ex-husband intervenes, she chooses restraint instead of open conflict. That hesitation does not feel like weakness; it shows a conscious effort to recalibrate, a refusal to let authority dominate intimacy. Cinematic techniques reinforce this depiction: close-up shots of Tiemei performing housework or observing Moli materialize affective circulation, highlighting the intersection of labor, care, and relational negotiation. Moli's responses--sometimes resistant, sometimes cooperative--further illustrate the iterative, adaptive nature of mother-daughter intimacy. Drawing on Ahmed and Miller, these practices reveal how emotional labor, material culture, and micro-level social interaction together produce maternal subjectivity [2,8].

Ultimately, *Her Story* frames motherhood as contingent, relational, and processual. Statements such as Moli's "Who my mother loves is her own choice" foreground maternal agency and contribute to egalitarian reconstructions of mother-daughter relationships. The daughter's understanding and response to her mother in the interaction is also an emotional labor, which not only maintains intimate relationships, but is also absorbed and reproduced by the motherhood culture [9]. The film demonstrates that maternal labor can exist outside rigid archetypes, offering a micro-level perspective on negotiation, adaptation, and affective labor--A renewed mother-daughter relationship can emerge only when the mother steps beyond the roles of sacrifice and control,

reclaims her subjectivity, and is supported by a society willing to redefine maternal possibilities [10].

5. Gendered tensions in the evolution of motherhood: typologies and cultural negotiation

Comparative analysis of the three films highlights tensions between maternal roles and gendered expectations. The three typologies--absence, idealization, and negotiation--function in overlapping and sometimes contradictory ways.

In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, maternal absence necessitates paternal engagement in emotional and domestic labor, challenging the assumption that caregiving is inherently female. The family dining table becomes both a material and symbolic site for the redistribution of maternal roles, emphasizing that motherhood can be enacted through relational practice rather than biological designation.

In contrast, the cultural idealization of motherhood is emphasized in *Hi, Mom*. Li Huanying's devotion, selflessness, and moral leadership are honored, establishing a standard for maternal conduct. Through close-ups, dramatized caregiving scenes, and ritualized group moments, the films make these emotional practices appear familiar and even routine. Such strategies resonate with Ahmed's notion of affective "stickiness" as well as Chodorow's account of how maternal expectations are reproduced [7,8]. In contrast, *Her Story* presents a maternal identity that shifts with context—less tied to fixed ideals and more reliant on dialogue, compromise, and attentiveness to change. Tiemei mothers not through abstract prescriptions but through practical adjustments: encouraging her daughter's new pursuits, stepping back when needed, and managing the pressures of her environment. Different models of motherhood--functional substitution, emotional regulation, adaptive negotiation--emerge side by side rather than in a single developmental path. Read together, they underline that motherhood is not a static essence but a practice that is relational, socially shaped, and constantly in flux.

6. Conclusion

When read side by side, *Eat Drink Man Woman*, *Hi, Mom*, and *Her Story* make clear that there is no single or linear story of motherhood in Chinese-language cinema. The mothers in these films are not abstract ideals but individuals whose roles take shape through history, culture, and everyday family dynamics. Their relationships with daughters shift from duty and dependence toward conversation, compromise, and shared decision-making.

The framework of "presence" and "absence" offers one way of grasping how emotional labor and authority circulate. Presence can be seen in ordinary gestures of showing up; absence, in the subtle gaps of unspoken care. *Eat Drink Man Woman* locates absence in paternal mediation of maternal work, *Hi, Mom* draws on nostalgia to idealize the mother, and *Her Story* portrays negotiation as an ongoing process.

Rather than fixing motherhood to biology or tradition, these films underline its relational and changing character. What stands out is the tension mothers carry: being asked to nurture, to set moral standards, and to assert their own desires, all at the same time. This contradiction does not belong to cinema alone--it points to wider questions of how maternal labor is valued and how cultural norms continue to shape women's choices. Future research might look not only at film but also at newer media forms, asking how maternal figures are reimagined in response to shifting social and generational pressures.

References

- [1] Xu, Z. N. (2023). *Mother–Daughter Relationships in Women's Writing* [Master's thesis]. Beijing: China Film Art Research Center.
- [2] Miller, D. (1998). *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- [3] Croll, E. (2006). *Family and Social Change in Contemporary China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Curtiss, S. L. (2018). Integrating family ritual and sociocultural theories as a framework for understanding mealtimes of families with children on the autism spectrum. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 10(4), 749–764.
- [5] Todorov, T. (2002) *Poetics of Prose* (Chinese translation). Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Press.
- [6] Schmidt, E.-M., Steinbach, A., & Hennig, M. (2023). What makes a good mother? Two decades of research reflecting social norms of motherhood. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 15(1), 57–77.
- [7] Chodorow, N. (2001) *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Chinese translation). Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore.
- [8] Ahmed, S. (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- [9] Hochschild, A. R., & Machung, A. (2012). *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (20th Anniversary ed.). New York: Penguin Books.
- [10] Guangming Daily. (2025). *Beyond Symbiosis: The Reconstruction of Mother–Daughter Relations in Her Story* [EB/OL]. Guangming Online.