

A Critical Analysis of Feminist Consciousness in Her Story

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Abstract. This article offers a systematic analysis of the female consciousness embodied in Chinese feminist movie, *Her Story*. *Her Story* uses a plain visual style and everyday narrative to depict the survival dilemma and consciousness awakening process of contemporary women under the patriarchal structure. The film focuses on three generations of women: single mother Wang Tiemei, young band lead singer Xiao Ye, and Wang's young daughter Wang Moli. Through their daily struggles and growth, it reveals the path of female subjectivity reconstruction from "being watched" to "self-writing". This article focuses on the concept of female consciousness in Chinese feminist discourse and explores its close connection with feminist film theory. Taking director Shao Yihui's film *Her Story* as a starting point, my analysis places it in the Chinese female film genealogy, with analysis of the changes in female film production. By looking at the portrayal of female characters, the construction of female relationships, and the expressions of women in family and social spaces in the film, this article reveals the connotations of female consciousness portrayed in movies in multiple dimensions such as self-awareness, emotional relationships, and social participation. It also explores how movies break through the constraints of traditional gender concepts, present the spirit of women's independence and pursuit of equality, and lead a positive impact on contemporary gender politics in China.

Keywords: *Her Story*, Feminist films, Female consciousness, Awakening of subjectivity, Role building

1. Introduction

Her Story (2024) is a drama film written and directed by Shao Yihui, starring Song Jia, Zhong Chuxi, and Zeng Mumei. The film depicts the story of Wang Tiemei, a single mother, who moves to a new home with her daughter Wang Moli. Her neighbour, Xiao Ye, is a rebellious and romantic young girl. This encounter makes them good friends who always support each other to overcome old traumas and life challenges although they have completely different personalities. The film reflects Shao Yihui's feminist sensibility, emphasizing both the marginalization of single mothers and the precarity of journalism work. By addressing women's experiences in social and economic contexts, *Her Story* offers a sharp, nuanced portrayal of women on screen. In 2024, this film won the highest rating for Chinese-language films and the highest rating for comedies on the Douban annual film list. As of December 25, 2024, its cumulative box office had exceeded 700 million yuan. On January

11, 2025, the film won the 31st Shanghai Film Critics Award for Top Ten Films of the Year and New Talent Work of the Year [1].

Throughout Chinese cinema history, feminist films have gradually emerged as significant cultural expression for exploring women's destinies, gender equality, and female subjectivity. Throughout Chinese cinema history, feminist films have gradually applied as significant cultural venue for exploring women's destinies, gender equality, and female subjectivity. In terms of the content in feminist films, female characters are no longer portrayed as housewives or trophy girls who only serve for men's life. This transformation not only grants female characters more autonomy and discourse power, but also enables audiences to re-examine the world from a female perspective and experience the unique life experiences of women. Against this backdrop, this article focuses on the feminist consciousness embodied in *Her Story*. By analyzing the discursive and cinematic construction of female characters, this article will further articulate how contemporary feminist cinema moves beyond traditional portrayals of women.

2. Theoretical and historical framework

2.1. Feminist consciousness in China

In the context of Chinese society, female consciousness in feminist discourse refers to women's awareness of their gender identity, their perception of gender inequality, and their pursuit of gender equality and self-actualization. It also embodies women's reflexive thinking on their physical being, their position in society, and their cultural position. It has its demand for liberation from traditional sex roles for individual entrance into society.

It is born out of intellectual awakening and knowledge, and broadens into self-consciousness based upon sex. It asserts that women are individuals in their own right, and connects their individualities with their experiences, which leads to their assuming the functions of subjects of thought and experience and of expression. Female consciousness not only focuses on women's individual rights and interests but also emphasizes the overall development of women as a group. It aims to break gender discrimination and gender stereotypes, and build a more equal social environment.

The awakening of women's consciousness in China is not only influenced by western feminism, but also rooted in local feminist practices. The awakening of women's collective consciousness in China occurred in the early 20th century, when a large number of women's groups emerged, such as the Chinese Women's Journal, the Girls' Patriotic Society, and the Shanghai Women's Association, which advocated education for women, social activity and equality for the sexes [2]. As a result, women began to move from the closed small family to the larger society and were able to participate in the public issues. The spread of feminist ideas was further facilitated by the advent of modern communication technologies, allowing these ideas to reach wider audiences.

Chinese feminism is not a simple replication of the Western feminist framework, but a theory and practical path formed in the local social context. It deconstructs patriarchal culture and systems from a female perspective, reveals the root causes of gender inequality, and considers the impact of intersecting differences such as class, urban-rural location, and ethnicity on women's situations. In terms of women issues, Rural women face double marginalization—both from patriarchal authority within the family and from exploitative economic structures. In contrast, although urban women may enjoy greater economic opportunities, they continue to encounter persistent discrimination in the workplace. The deepening of Chinese feminism is essentially a continuous questioning of fairness and justice in the period of social transformation. The purpose of feminist project in China

is to advocate social justice in gender. Unlike "subverting patriarchal politics", Chinese feminism focuses more on striving for reforms within the existing political framework and gradually expanding women's political participation.

2.2. Feminist cinema

Film, as a powerful medium of cultural expression, has long been applied as a vital platform for articulating women's consciousness and circulating feminist messages. Theoretically, the early film theories took film as a man's technology. In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey introduces the theory of "male gaze," where she argues that traditional Hollywood films engineered the constant gaze toward women. Gazing, in her argument, is a power which positions women as an object to satisfy men's desire [3]. Under this gaze mechanism, women are objectified and lose their subjectivity. To challenge the notion of film as a male-dominated cultural and ideological apparatus, feminist films attempt to disrupt the monopoly of "male gaze," granting women subjectivity, enabling them to become the subjects of narratives, and expressing their own voices and perspectives.

Feminist film theory provides an important theoretical tool for analyzing female consciousness in films. By applying the theory of "male gaze," it is possible to reveal gender inequality present in films and criticize the objectification of women. Emphasizing subjectivity helps to explore the inner world and subjective consciousness of women in films, presenting their unique perspectives and feelings.

2.2.1. Feminist cinema in China

In the 1990s, Chinese women's films began to emerge. During this period, women's films often took women's emotional lives as their entry point, focusing on the predicaments and struggles of women in family and society. For example, *Hong Fen* directed by Li Shaohong tells the fate of two prostitutes in the transformation of the new society from a unique female perspective, showing women's helplessness and resistance in the era of change [4]. These films are relatively subtle in narrative, focusing on the delicate depiction of women's inner world, but there are still certain limitations in expressing women's subjectivity, often still influenced by traditional gender concepts.

From the female-centered films of the 1990s to the works of independent female directors today, Chinese feminist films have undergone significant changes. In terms of creative subjects, an increasing number of independent female directors have significantly changed the landscape of film art of China. In terms of creative themes, they are no longer limited to women's emotional lives and family dilemmas, but have expanded to broader social fields, focusing on issues such as women's career development, social participation, and gender politics.

In terms of artistic style, the works of independent female directors are more diversified and distinctive. They have borrowed cinematic techniques from both domestic and international cinema with local culture and social realities, creating films with unique appeal. At the same time, The rise of the Internet and new media has further expanded the reach of these works, which fosters wider audience engagement and discussion. Through these efforts, feminist films have become vital instruments for raising public awareness of gender politics.

3. Narrative and character analysis

3.1. Narrative style and character portrayal in *Her Story*

From a narrative perspective, *Her Story* centers on women as both its subject and creative focus. It differs from single-perspective narrative style. Instead, the film presents the interplay of different female viewpoints to capture the complexities of women's experiences in urban Shanghai. The film offers an alternative narrative space for women, allowing them build relationship outside domestic settings and heterosexual family structure. *Her Story* boldly takes women's daily lives as its main content, focusing on various aspects such as their career struggles, emotional entanglements, and self-awareness. Through delicate and authentic portrayal, it reveals the rich and complex inner world of women. This narrative approach breaks the linear narrative structure of traditional films, providing viewers with a broader space for contemplation [5]. The film offers a realistic yet diverse portrayal of female characters. They range from independent and ambitious career women to gentle and compassionate housewives, as well as artists and intellectuals. They are no longer defined by a single standard, but rather exhibit a variety of personality traits and life choices. Instead, they actively pursue their aspirations and happiness, fearlessly overcoming life's obstacles and problems. At the same time, the movie shed light on the real-life problems within women's experience, like discrimination at work and pressure from their families. But the female protagonists' hard work and determination give it a positive message that encourages women to face challenges head-on and grow as people.

In addition, *Her Story* also focuses on portraying the intimacy between women by depiction their mutual support, understanding and companionship. Instead of positioning women as a sexualized object, the female characters are no longer isolated individuals. For example, in the film, when Wang Tiemei encounters setbacks in her career, Xiaoye will helps her find out a solution. This mutual assistance and support among women exemplify the strength of female solidarity and the importance of women building their own support networks in the pursuit of self-realization. At the same time, while competition among women is recognized, it is changed to a formidable strength which assures of continuous self-improvement and growth.

3.2. Comparison with earlier representations of women in mainstream Chinese cinema

In early Chinese films, mainstream female characters were constrained by traditional morality, symbolizing weakness and helplessness, and were objects of male desire. Influenced by Confucian ideology deeply rooted in Chinese culture, many female characters were portrayed as homemakers, loyal wives, and sacrificing moms, whose primary duty was to serve and sustain their families [6]. For example, in the film *Spring River Flows East*, the character Su Fen is diligent, kind, and unwavering in her loyalty. During her husband's absence to fight in the war, she alone took care of her mother-in-law and children. Despite the hardships of life, she always adhered to her commitment to the family. Her behavior fully conformed to the moral requirements of traditional society for women and was a concentrated expression of traditional female virtues. In early film narratives, women were often endowed with the trait of weakness, lacking the ability to solve problems independently and needing male protection and salvation. At the same time, female characters were emotionally highly dependent on men. Their love was often passive, viewing men's love as the meaning and value of life.

The female characters in *Her Story* break away from the traditional pattern of economic and emotional dependence on men, which highlights women's independence and self-determination in

their own life. For instance, the heroine Wang Tiemei, a single mother and successful professional, manages her career, household, and child on her own. She proves that women in the new era could imagine the world outside their own house. The female characters in *Her Story* all have their own hobbies and career. For instance, Xiao Ye, who loves music and is the lead singer of a band, pursues self-expression and artistic achievement in the world of music. The space for "personal life" significantly expands the narrative where women are associated with.

The female characters in the film also advocate for equal and respectful relationships between men and women. They no longer view men as dominators, but instead aspire to establish equal and mutually supportive partnerships with them. This advocacy for equal relationships reflects the pursuit and understanding of gender equality by women in the new era.

In *Her Story*, the female protagonists have their own social circles and ways of living, and they take part in a wide range of social activities that show how women are growing in many ways in the modern world. They want equal and respectful relationships with men, and they don't believe in the idea that males are superior to women. Instead, they want to form partnerships that help each other. This quest for equality reflects the increasing consciousness of gender justice among modern women. In contrast, early Chinese films generally showed women as weak and dependent, limited to domestic responsibilities and only valued within the family. *Her Story* goes against these misogyny by showing women who are smart, confident, and able to do things, and who know themselves well. The female consciousness could be found their honesty to themselves. Instead of being stereotypical empowered women, all of the three female characters also show their vulnerability in the story.

4. Aesthetic strategies and female consciousness

4.1. Cinematography: close-ups on women's and gaze reversal

Director Shao Yihui uses diverse audio-visual languages, spatial design, and sound to create a feminized narrative environment by putting female awareness into every aesthetic layer of the picture.

In *Her Story*, close-up shots of female faces and bodies shift the focus from external observation to self-identification. Director Shao Yihui employs these shots not to objectify women, as in the traditional male gaze, but to allow for self-examination and self-expression. For example, the close-ups of the heroine in scenes such as makeup and dressing up in the film showcase women's awareness of their own bodies, as a form of self-care. Through looking at themselves, women regain control over their own bodies and establish positive self-identity.

Aesthetically, *Her Story* employs a distinctly female gaze, functioning as an oppositional perspective that challenges existing power structures. Many scenes in the film show female characters actively observing their surroundings and the male characters. This reversal of gaze breaks the hegemony of male gaze, grants women subjectivity, and transforms women from passive objects of observation to active subjects with the ability to observe and judge.

4.2. Movie sound embody a feminine sensibility

In *Her Story*, feminist dialogue plays an important role in delivering their views, emotions, and needs of women. For example, the heroine actively engages in arguments with those who oppose her, reflecting women's pursuit of equal communication and self-expression. Shao Yihui's dialogue

design not only carries emotional warmth but also has practical relevance, more directly reflecting the living conditions and aspirations of contemporary women in society.

Music and sound effects are key tools for conveying the emotional world of female characters. The film uses music that is suitable for its female-centered subject matter, utilizing melody and rhythm to express its characters' inner lives. For instance, when the heroine experiences emotional ups and downs, the soothing and melancholic music can enhance the emotional resonance of the audience. Simultaneously, the use of sound effects is also ingenious, incorporating various sound details from daily life to create a realistic and vivid atmosphere, allowing the audience to better immerse themselves in the female's life scenario.

4.3. Space design: a place for negotiating gender identity

The portrayal of spatial settings in films serves as sites of negotiation for gendered identity. Domestic spaces in film are not always the cozy havens they are traditionally imagined to be. In films, domestic spaces are both places where women are oppressed and the starting points for their awakening and rebellion. The workplace is another important space for showcasing women's professional identities. In films, female characters exhibit professionalism, confidence, and independence in the workplace. They are no longer confined to traditional gender roles, but actively pursue their professional dreams and realize their self-worth through work. The heroine Wang Tiemei's hard work and struggle in the workplace reflect women's pursuit of economic independence and challenge to traditional gender division of labor. The film emphasizes women's proactive progress and success in the workplace, reflecting contemporary society's greater recognition and support for women's career development.

In *Her Story*, public spaces serve as crucial venues for women's socializing and self-expression. The female characters in the film engage in communication and interaction with others in these public spaces, showcasing their individuality and charm. They are no longer confined to the narrow confines of family and work, but actively participate in activities to express themselves and expand their social circles.

5. Comparison between *Her Story* and world feminist films

While Shao's film draws on the strong tradition of feminist cinema, it exhibits a markedly different aesthetic style from its predecessors. For example, Chantal Akerman's works also feature detailed portrayals of women's daily actions, but she approaches women's issues from an objective perspective, and aims at carrying an accurate reflection on social reality. Her focus on women has become central to her work through positioning them as the core of the narrative rather than passive observers. In *Jeanne Dielman*, Feminism is Chantal Akerman's guiding principle, with realism serving as the narrative framework that contains it [7]. The style of minimalism perfectly fits the monotonous and boring life of a housewife that Akerman wants to present, while the restraint of minimalism corresponds to Akerman's calm feminist attitude. Compared to the works of Chantal Akerman, Shao Yihui's lens possesses a greater emotional warmth, emphasizing the delicate emotions and shifts in self-awareness within women's inner worlds, allowing viewers to more directly perceive the emotional realm of female characters.

Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* uses domestic space as the primary narrative setting, revealing women's oppression and constraints within the family by showcasing the daily chores of the heroine Jeanne in her household. In contrast, although Shao Yihui also focuses on the plight of

women within the family in *Her Story*, she places greater emphasis on showcasing women's rebellion and growth.

Her Story and the works of Chantal Akerman all focus on the predicaments and awakening processes faced by women in society. Whether it's the suppression and constraints imposed on women in traditional society or the challenges encountered by women in contemporary society in their pursuit of equality and self-actualization, these films showcase women's struggles and resistance through different narrative styles and aesthetic strategies.

6. Conclusion

The film demonstrates women's subjectivity through the construction of narrative perspective, character portrayal, theme expression, and aesthetic style.

The significance of *Her Story* as part of the new wave of Chinese feminist cinema lies in its breakthrough of the traditional creative mode of films featuring female themes, presenting women's lives and spiritual world from a more open and diverse perspective. The film not only focuses on the realistic predicaments of women but also showcases their growth and self-actualization, enriching the connotation of feminist culture and providing new ideas and directions for the development of Chinese feminist culture.

The release of this film sparked widespread attention and discussion from all sectors of society. It prompted audiences to re-examine the status and role of women in society and reflect on the importance of gender equality. Through the dissemination of the film, more people became aware of the problems and challenges faced by women, stimulating social awareness and protection of women's rights. This extensive discussion and attention have helped to create a positive social atmosphere and promote the further development of feminist culture in China.

The success of *Her Story* has set an example for feminist film creation, inspiring more filmmakers to pay attention to female-oriented themes and devote themselves to the creation of feminist films. It proves that feminist films are attractive and competitive in the market, providing more creative opportunities and development space for female filmmakers. At the same time, the creative concepts and aesthetic styles presented in the film also provide reference and guidance for other filmmakers, helping to cultivate more outstanding talents in feminist film [8].

The issues faced by women in the workplace and family, such as gender discrimination, workplace inequality, and uneven distribution of family responsibilities, as portrayed in the film *Her Story*, are core concerns of the feminist movement in China's real world. Through artistic expression, the film vividly presents these real-life issues to the audience, allowing more people to recognize the difficulties faced by women. It provides specific factual evidence and case support for the feminist movement, helping to promote society's high attention and resolution of these issues.

As a medium for mass cultural dissemination, film boasts a vast audience and significant influence. *Her Story* conveys feminist ideologies such as equality, respect, and autonomy to its viewers through captivating narratives and vivid imagery. These ideologies align with the goals of the feminist movement, evoking emotional resonance among viewers and guiding them towards establishing correct gender perceptions. The dissemination of films aids in amplifying the social impact of the feminist movement, drawing more individuals to participate in it, and facilitating the realization of gender equality. The brave struggles and self-growth of female characters in films set examples for women in real life. Their indomitable spirit in the face of adversity inspires women to courageously pursue their rights and dreams. Many female viewers, after watching the films, are encouraged and inspired to actively engage in the feminist movement, striving to change their own

destinies and promote social progress. Films have become catalysts for women's empowerment, fostering the development and growth of the feminist movement.

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