

# A Study on the Image Change of Working Women in Chinese Realist Films after The Period of Reform and Opening-up

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## Abstract:

After the reform and opening up, China ushered in a vigorous period of the development of realistic films, and women began to gradually step out of the family. They gradually possessed an independent consciousness and began to pursue their own careers. This study observes the images of working women in Chinese realistic films after the reform and opening-up through observation methods, analyzes the relationship between the cinematic portrayal of working women and the historical background, and interprets the reasons behind the changes in the portrayal of women. Additionally, it puts forward expectations for the portrayal of working women in future Chinese realistic films. This study found that, driven by both social and individual factors, the image of working women has become more complex and diversified over the past 50 years. They have gradually voiced the concerns of contemporary women to society, and have contributed to the progress of social attitudes. After the reform and opening-up, the evolution of the image of working women in Chinese realistic films has gradually elevated female values and been endowed with richer cultural connotations in the new era.

**Keywords:** Working Women; Chinese Realistic Films; Reform and Opening up; Female Values

## 1. Introduction

The start of China's film industry originated from the first screening of Western films at the Yet Another Tea House of Xuyuan Garden in Shanghai in 1896, and the appearance of "Dingjun Mountain" in 1905 marked the birth of Chinese cinema. After the May Fourth Movement, China's film industry gradually

emerged, and some early film works began to try to reflect social reality and people's lives. Realist films became one of the important genres of the time. During the Anti-Japanese War, realist films were used to reflect the war and national liberation on a large scale, gradually becoming an important means of political propaganda and social ideology. Similarly, after the founding of the People's Republic of China,

film workers, influenced by socialist realism, created realistic films with profound social significance. However, during the Cultural Revolution, the creation of realist films was greatly restricted and the film creation process was greatly slowed down.

Until the successful convening of the Third Plenary Session of the 11th CPC Central Committee in December 1978, China began the great journey of reform and opening up. With the great process of reform and opening up, China's film industry received strong policy support and promotion. The direction of "serving the people and socialism" and the principle of "letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend" also provided a more relaxed and free environment for film creation. Directors began to experiment with more authentic stories, breaking through previous political constraints, reflecting the diversity of society and the changes in individual destinies, ushering in a new climax in the development of realistic films.

Compared with the development of Chinese realist films, the real appearance and development of working women on the screen of Chinese realist films lagged behind. Before the reform and opening up period, the image of working women was not common in realistic films, but it had begun to sprout. After the founding of New China, women were no longer merely appendages of the family but began to demonstrate their abilities and values in the workplace. The images of working women on the screen began to multiply and became more comprehensive and full-bodied. During this period, the images of working women also became more diverse, covering various fields such as doctors, lawyers, teachers, entrepreneurs, and more. With the further advancement of reform and opening up and the rapid development of the social economy, women's status and role in the workplace became increasingly prominent. As one of the important artistic forms reflecting social reality, realistic films began to pay more attention to the struggles and growth of working women. These realistic works began to showcase the charm and elegance of women in the workplace and attempted to explore the multiple roles and complex emotions of women in family, society, and personal growth.

Therefore, with the improvement of women's status in society and the increase in their proportion in the workplace, the on-screen image of working women should also be changed and grown. This study hopes to construct a more complete history of the growth of female images by studying the changes in the image of working women in Chinese realist films since the reform and opening up and also to make efforts to create more representative images of women in the workplace and tell better Chinese stories in Chinese realist films in the new era.

## 2. Literature Review

Feminist film theory began to be introduced by the film industry in 1988, so judging a film from such a theoretical perspective could reflect the gender subconscious behind the image to a certain extent. After forming a preliminary gender identification of themselves at an early age, people need to shape their own gender behavior and gender psychology in society, so as to grow into men and women. Therefore, the image of women in the film is undoubtedly a refraction of the consciousness and growth of women in reality [1]. The appearance of female workplace films not only depicts the work life and emotional expression of working women but also conveys the female values that change with the development of the times and the change of ideology. This is a highly universal value that was virtually unaffected by differences in geography and cultural perspectives [2].

In early realist films, working women in Western films were often created to face a series of tensions to drive plot development or conflict while pursuing historically male careers [3]. Similarly, there were limitations in Chinese films before the period of reform and opening up. The female images in realistic films before the reform and opening up often portrayed the home and farmland as their workplaces. It highlighted the stereotype of women's social roles. Such images of working women were often created to serve the family and conform to the prevailing ideology and social expectations at that time, thus losing the diversity of women's experiences and limiting their agency and autonomy [4].

Compared with the one-way output of female characters from the screen to the audience before the reform and opening up, due to the gradual disappearance of ideological limitations after the reform and opening up, the female characters on the screen were more able to show real-life and express public ideas and empathized with the audience to form a two-way interaction [5]. In several romantic films in 1979, the images of women had undergone a different transformation from the previous ones, and they were able to abandon the ideological voice in their lives and began to express themselves bravely [6]. Such a transformation could make women think more deeply about their future development in reality, and it also promoted the change of the image of working women in Chinese realist films. As Chao Wang said, the status of women in China has changed a lot after the reform and opening up, which has made the image of women in the film more independent and masculine. At the same time, it shows the diversification of occupations [7].

In realist films, the image of women also has a more diverse perspective and expression, and the growth of

characters under multiple complex factors is constructed while the class may still exist [8]. In the realistic films of the new era, in addition to portraying the familial roles inherent to women, they also depict traditional professional identities such as teachers and doctors, as well as new professional images like anchors and scientists, making the on-screen portrayal of working women more open and diverse [9]. However, the image of working women with multiple identities often cannot be fully expressed in films, tending to favor either the domestic sphere or a specific working field, leading to misunderstandings about working women's image under different narrative techniques [10]. The majority of filmmakers and audiences have gradually discovered the problem, but there seems to be no real solution in Chinese realist films.

Most of the above studies have introduced feminist films after the reform and opening up, and some scholars have studied realistic films and working women, which have helped this study to understand some information and content. However, there are still some research gaps. Few scholars have focused on the changes in the screen image of working women after the reform and opening up. In addition, this study can provide new ideas for Chinese realist films. It can make future films better show women's real workplaces and convey women's voices. In order to achieve the expected purpose and significance of this study, this study will use qualitative research methods to study the changes in the image of working women in Chinese realist films after the reform and opening up.

### 3. Methodology

This study uses the observation method to study the change in the image of working women in Chinese realist films after the reform and opening up. This study takes the observation of realistic films as the primary principle, and on this basis, observes films that have performed well in terms of box office, word-of-mouth, and audience reach within the specified time period. In observing the image of working women, this study strives to adhere to the principles of typification, diversification, and authenticity, in order to better accomplish the research objectives.

In this part, the researcher looked at 100 Chinese realist films with high box office and high social influence. These realistic films are all from the past 50 years since the reform and opening-up, and most of them portray female images or images of working women. In these films, the researcher looked at about 60 working women to consider how the image of women has changed during this period. In this study, a small number of realist films before the reform and opening up will be compared with those after the reform and opening up through observation, in order

to observe the macro transformation of women's images in the historical background. In many films after the reform and opening up, the perspective is more focused on the image embodiment and changes of working women in realistic films. It is hoped that this study can observe whether the image of working women has changed after the reform and opening up, what aspects have changed, and what are the reasons for the change. At the same time, when observing realistic films in the new era, this study will observe the relationship between the image of working women on the screen and the actual reality of the female group in the workplace, in order to find the basis for the change of such images in the film and the future development situation.

### 4. Results

The first observation of this study is that the image of women in the workplace began to increase during the early stage of reform and opening-up (1979-1990), and began to show the style of new Chinese women in a positive way. Compared to the marginalized or supporting roles that working women held before the reform and opening-up, the image of working women during this period made significant breakthroughs. However, most of these images were still constrained by traditional notions and did not truly represent the image of working women in a meaningful way. For example, in the film "Red Skirts Are Popular on the Street", the cotton mill worker Tao Xing'er breaks through the shackles of old concepts under the title of "Model Worker" and strives to make progress in the workplace. The female image it portrays brings both material and spiritual impact to people, but this image is still nested within the socially expected shell of the "Model Worker," lacking significant individual characteristics.

In the 1990s, the image of working women in Chinese realistic films often had multiple elements of both family and workplace, which is the second observation. During this period, films began to focus on women's inner emotions and personal pursuits, but issues such as urban-rural differences and gender discrimination still existed. For example, director Ann Hui's film "A Woman, Forty" tells the story of a typical working woman, A'e, who chooses to take on the responsibility of caring for her seriously ill father-in-law in the family while balancing workplace pressures. The film focuses on the life plight of women with multiple identities and begins to show women's inner struggles, choices, and growth for family and work. In contrast, Zhang Yimou's film "The Story of Qiu Ju" depicts the story of a peasant woman, Qiu Ju, who relentlessly pursues justice through legal channels when faced with injustice, reflecting the difficulties faced by working

women in a male-dominated society in achieving self-worth and dignity. This not only reflects the dedication of working women to the family but also reflects the real social problems they faced in society at that time to a certain extent.

Finally, the working women in the realist films of the new era have begun to truly awaken the consciousness of women and pursue the realization of personal value under the characteristics of independence and individuality. For instance, "Go Lala Go!" tells the story of an urban white-collar worker, Du Lala, who rises from obscurity to become a senior executive in a company through her unremitting efforts. The image of Du Lala not only showcases the intelligence and diligence of working women but also reveals how they utilize wisdom and courage to overcome various challenges and difficulties in the workplace, ultimately achieving self-worth.

## 5. Discussion

The increase in the number of working women's images portrayed in Chinese realistic films from 1978 to 1990 demonstrates the elevation of women's social status. During the infancy of Chinese films, due to the traditional belief that "women should not appear in public," female screen images were even portrayed by male actors, such as in the film "Zhuangzi Tests His Wife". After the reform and opening up, such a situation has basically disappeared. During this period, women began to migrate from rural areas to cities, attempting to break free from traditional constraints. This phenomenon opened the door to ideological liberation for women at the time, and the image of working women as laborers emerged in large numbers on the screen. However, due to the dual influence of national policies and social perceptions, the gender characteristics of working women's images on the screen were downplayed, and they more often represented the broader group of social progress. As a result, they lacked the ability to directly reflect the current status of women in the real workplace and were relatively generalized. Over the course of more than a decade in realistic films, the portrayal of female workplace images sparked the germination of independence consciousness among female groups in society. To this day, the pursuit of independence remains the cornerstone of feminist cinema. The influence of old-fashioned beliefs has indeed hindered the progress of working women, with many still viewed as appendages to the family. Nevertheless, significant changes took place in this regard during the 1990s.

With the development of the market economy in the 1990s, the improvement of women's status in the workplace has also diversified the image of working women in

films. Although the female characters in the realistic films of this period were still situated within the broader context of the family, they possessed greater independence and autonomy. The emergence of this phenomenon was also due to the popularity of Hong Kong and Taiwanese cultures at that time, and the female images in "Qiongyao dramas" became the objects of women's crazy infatuation. Even though most of these female screen images pursued pure love, they also possessed anti-traditional ideologies, providing answers for working women in real society to face problems in family and society. This also led to the 1990s realistic films starting to express the struggles and growth of working women's inner emotions, making these images more vivid and human. During this period, many representative images of working women emerged, which are still repeatedly mentioned by audiences and filmmakers until now. At the same time, the emergence of women's independent consciousness will also bring some impacts on families and society, and issues such as geographical and gender differences cannot be avoided. This gradually leads to new social topics. In the face of reality, working women begin to think about their personal values and try to make new efforts and choices.

Therefore, the improvement of women's status and the emergence of women's independent consciousness have begun to change gender awareness as the new era arrives, making the concept of gender equality mainstream. In the rapidly developing new era, audiences pursue the richness and depth of film content. So film creators also need to create more three-dimensional and realistic images to meet the demand. Therefore, since the new century, the trend of the integration of working women-themed films and realistic films has become more apparent. The image of working women in films is often able to handle the relationship between family and society skillfully and thus begins to shine brightly in the workplace. The positive portrayal of working women in films can help the public understand the importance of gender equality more quickly and fully demonstrates the important position of women in the workplace. Such initiatives can successfully encourage women to realize their personal values in real society and bravely face challenges and difficulties in the workplace.

In the future, when Chinese realistic films portray professional women, they need to preserve the traits of independence, self-confidence, and bravery that women have developed in the workplace over the past 50 years. Furthermore, they should actively explore the growth of contemporary professional women, delve deeply into their inner charm and value, and contribute to the flourishing of China's film industry with even more splendid works. Similarly, filmmakers need to continue to convey the

awareness of gender equality through the medium of film and promote society's respect for women and the protection of women's rights.

## 6. Conclusion

In summary, after the reform and opening-up, the image of working women in Chinese realistic films has undergone a process from simplification to complication and from singleness to diversity. The early images of working women were conceptualized due to the influence of ideology and traditional concepts. However, with the awakening of women's consciousness and the progress of society, Chinese realistic films began to reflect on the relationship between women's individuality, family, and society, attempting to answer the question of how women should balance their careers and families, and providing referential answers to the problems arising in the real society. In the new era, more and more realistic films portray more three-dimensional images of working women through the stories of real women in the workplace, deeply exploring women's thoughts, embodying and expressing the female spirit, and sending encouragement and praise to women's hard work in the workplace.

The gradual increase in the portrayal of working women's images in realistic films after 1978 not only reflects the improvement of women's status in society but also conveys the message that women aspire to enhance their sense of independence and autonomy and seek personal value in society. This transition, from the dual imprints of tradition and revolution to the enhancement of independence and autonomy, and then to the exploration of multiple roles and identity recognition, not only reflects the development and progress of Chinese society and culture, the rising recognition of gender equality consciousness but also embodies the profound insight and humanistic concern of film art towards real life. In the future, with the continuous development and progress of society, it is highly anticipated that more authentic, three-dimensional,

and vivid images of working women will be featured in films. It is believed that this will also bring more thoughts and inspiration to the audience.

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