

An Examination of Female Image Designs in the Korean Drama “Reply 1988”

Yutong Li

College of Film, Television, and
Media, Guangxi Arts University,
Nanning, China

Email: lluvia.1218.yt@gmail.com

Abstract:

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the demand for feminist discourse. Furthermore, the subject of how to portray women in television dramas has also become a topic of public interest. The Korean drama ‘Reply 1988’, which has gained considerable popularity in recent years, has been identified as a significant contributor to the evolving representation of women in the media. Nevertheless, there is a paucity of research in this area. This study aims to analyse the role of women’s image design in the drama’s success, employing case studies, questionnaires and other methods to collect and investigate the data. This study collects the opinions of Chinese female viewers aged 20-50 on the female image design in Reply 1988. The findings indicate that a well-designed female image can promote the development of the drama and leave a lasting impression on the viewers. The female image design represents the external manifestation of the characters’ personalities and inner activities in the drama. Furthermore, China and South Korea are situated within the same East Asian cultural circle and share a similar cultural background, which also provides a reference point for Chinese dramas. Consequently, the female image design has the potential to enhance the popularity of the drama and exert a significant and enduring influence.

Keywords: Image design; Reply 1988; feminism; Korean drama.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the demand for feminist discourse. Furthermore, the subject of how to portray women in television dramas has also become a topic of public interest. The Korean drama ‘Reply 1988’, which has achieved considerable popularity in recent years, has a signifi-

cant impact on the portrayal of women in the media. The drama is set in Seoul in 1988 and depicts the lives of five families residing in Ssangmun-dong, Dobong-gu, Seoul. The drama as a whole portrays the intertwined themes of familial warmth, romantic love and platonic friendship, set against the backdrop of a small-town community. As a family ethical drama, the series focuses on women of different ages and

backgrounds. By meticulously portraying each woman's personal image, clothing, dress, and makeup, the series enriches the storytelling as well as the feminist discourse conveyed by the drama. Furthermore, the series has also aroused widespread discussion in China, once bringing a retro trend, which has brought reference to the design of women's image in China's dramas.

Following the success of *Reply 1988* in China, it has become a topic of considerable interest and investigation in both academic and industrial contexts. With the passage of time, the number of articles on the subject has increased, and the perspectives have become more nuanced. Previous studies on the drama *Reply 1988* have primarily focused on three key areas. Firstly, scholars have explored the reasons for its popularity in terms of its narrative techniques. Scholars have argued that the television drama in question reflects a range of emotional states through the personalities of its characters. The series' retro character reflects the sentiments of the public, enabling it to capture the reality of the plot and elicit a strong emotional response from the audience. It succeeds in evoking laughter and tears, taking the audience on a journey through the full spectrum of human emotion and experience [1]. Then, the manner in which the aesthetic and thematic elements are presented enables the viewer to engage with the subject matter in a meaningful and productive manner, facilitating an understanding of the past [2]. Finally, the analysis is centred on the examination of the narratives and characters [3].

Korean dramas have evolved significantly over the course of their development, giving rise to numerous popular series. However, there has been a paucity of research examining the portrayal of female image design. The existing studies have primarily concentrated on the musical elements and filming techniques, with minimal attention devoted to the impact of the visuals. This paper analyses the female image design in the South Korean television series *Reply 1988*, taking into account the high cultural similarity between China and South Korea and the fact that the female characters in the series are a prominent topic of discussion in China. This paper employs a multi-method approach, utilising literature research, case study analysis and questionnaire surveys to examine the role and impact of female imagery in Korean dramas. The objective is to elucidate the attributes of female image design in Korean dramas and identify the factors that contribute to its success. The findings are then intended to inform the development of Chinese TV dramas.

2. Female Image Design

2.1 The Development of Female Image Design in Korean Drama

2.1.1 The Meaning of Female Image Design

The concept of image design is a holistic one, encompassing the design of a diverse range of objects, both for individual use and for collective purposes. These objects may be of a local or global scale. Image design incorporates a multitude of elements, including features, bodily shape, attire, and behaviour.

The term "physical image" is used to describe a visual representation of a woman that can be perceived through the human senses. This can be understood as a description of a woman based on her physical characteristics, including her gender, age, body type, and facial features [4].

2.1.2 Transmutation of Female Image Design in Korean Drama

The rapid development of the Korean television drama industry has resulted in a significant transformation in the portrayal of women in Korean dramas. The image of women in these dramas has shifted from a traditional, passive role to a more modern and active one. As society has developed and women's consciousness has been awakened, the portrayal and presentation of women in film and television dramas have also undergone significant changes. From the early portrayal of housewives to the modern depiction of women in the workplace, from a submissive and subordinate role to that of an independent individual, and from a traditional to a modern status, the improvement of women's status is evident [5]. This has resulted in a diversification of female image design. To illustrate, Cheon Song Yi in the popular drama series "You Who Came from the Stars" is memorable to the audience due to her striking attire and subtle makeup. In "Anna," the female protagonist Yumo undergoes a transformation into a "rich girl" through alterations in her appearance. In the drama "Reply 1988," both the primary and secondary characters are depicted in great detail, which enhances the viewers' perception of each female character.

2.2 The Use of Female Image Design in Korean Drama

The majority of female characters in Korean dramas are depicted as benevolent and resilient, exhibiting an unwavering resolve in the face of adversity. This portrayal has contributed to the emergence of multifaceted female char-

acters with well-rounded personalities. Furthermore, the narrative approach inherent to Korean dramas has been instrumental in showcasing a more diverse range of female characters. The effect is to present the outward expression of genuine emotion and the perceived vulnerability of on-screen characters, thereby prompting the viewer to empathise with them [6].

To illustrate, the contrasting colours of Deok-sun and Bo-ra, and the labelling of the 'leopard lady', Lo Mi-ran, are worthy of note.

2.2.1 Sung Deok-sun

Deok Sun's representative colour in the drama is yellow. Frequently, the actress is seen wearing warm colours, such as yellow, which serves to complement her characterisation as a lively and cute persona. The role of Sung Deok Sun is undertaken by Lee Hye Ri, a member of the popular girl group Girl's Day. She deviates from her conventional portrayal of a sexy female persona. In the drama, her skin is dark, and her short hair is plain, reminiscent of a tomboy with a hint of rusticity. Although the drama is predominantly presented in a plain face, it is evident that her facial features are notably delicate, her eyes are rounded, and when she smiles, her eyes are particularly prominent, evoking a sense of warmth. This is entirely consistent with the image of the warm second daughter that is presented in the drama. Deok-sun is characterised by a cheerful disposition. Her attire is notably stylish, reflecting the fashion trends of young women during that period. To illustrate, the most archetypal ensemble comprises knitwear and denim trousers. This is a youthful appearance that reflects her character as being both cute and confident.

Additionally, Deok-sun typically wore a neutral jacket. For instance, she paired a pink and white horizontal striped t-shirt with a white baseball jersey, black and white collar and cuffs, and a simple, casual look that exuded youthful vitality. Her choice of a green and grey school bag, which conveyed a tomboyish and humorous demeanor, reinforced the character's big-hearted personality.

A member of the viewing public draws attention to a particular scene. Following the deterioration of Asawa's father's health, he requested Deok Sun's assistance in caring for Asawa and accompanying him to China to compete. In a scene where the two characters meet after the competition, Deok Sun is depicted wearing a pink knit shirt, which contributes to her overall appearance of youthful charm. However, this was in fact the attire of Ah Ze, and she was so preoccupied with the care of Ah Ze that she neglected to attend to her own attire. Upon taking

a photograph with Ah Ze, she inquires as to the suitability of his attire. Asawa offers a positive assessment, and in response, Deok Sun indicates that the ensemble is Ah Ze's. The dress can be seen to symbolise that Deok Sun's heart is biased towards Ah Ze's side, thus paving the way for the two to get together later. This scene depicts Deok-sun as a benevolent, vivacious, yet frequently perplexed young woman, who exemplifies the general plight of women in that era.

However, it also illustrates her resilience and courage in confronting the challenges of life with her distinctive individuality and charisma. Deshan's character traits are distinctive and multifaceted. She is benevolent and optimistic, treating her friends with sincerity and selflessness, and is filial and considerate to her family. However, she is also sensitive, has low self-esteem, and craves understanding and acceptance, particularly in the context of romantic relationships. She is often caught in a state of self-doubt and emotional turmoil. This ambivalence renders DeShan's image as a three-dimensional and relatable figure, evoking a profound sense of empathy in observers.

2.2.2 Sung Bo-ra

Bo-ra's representative colour in the drama is purple. In her everyday attire, she tends to favour cooler, darker hues. This is consistent with the characterisation of the persona as calm and collected.

Actress Yoo Hye Young is not a striking beauty; her appearance is slight, and her features are somewhat weak. However, she is resilient and comfortable in her own skin. Her eyes are slightly tilted, conveying a sense of wisdom and detachment. This is entirely consistent with the portrayal of the older sister in the drama. Additionally, Bo-ra wears a pair of thin-framed glasses, which can also serve to modify her sense of seriousness and sharpness.

The most frequently referenced female image design in the drama is Deok Sun's clandestine use of her sister's denim jacket when her sister is absent, as well as her application of her sister's cosmetics. This results in her being nearly discovered by her sister. The interaction between the mother's brother and the fact that the entire incident is centered around a denim jacket contributes to a comedic tone. This serves to reinforce the older sister's authority as the eldest daughter and demonstrates that the denim jacket was a popular item of fashion at the time, particularly among young people. Furthermore, it demonstrates that Deok Sun was not regarded as a serious contender for the role of second oldest daughter in the family, and thus she presents herself in a relatively plain and simple manner.

In the drama Reply 1988, the two female protagonists are

presented as new Korean women, and the contrast between their personalities makes their destinies markedly different, challenging the audience's preconceived notions about Korean female protagonists in the past. The use of contrasting colours in the visual design serves to accentuate the characters' differences, enhancing their portrayal.

2.2.3 Ra Mi-ran

Ra Mi-ran, also known as the "Leopard Lady," is representative of the three mothers in *Hutong*. Regardless of their socioeconomic status, these women are distinguished by their adherence to the short, curly hairstyle that was a prominent fashion trend during the 1980s.

Ra Mi-ran is colloquially known as "Lady Leopard." As her name indicates, she exhibits a penchant for donning leopard print attire. As a character of considerable wealth, she has been depicted wearing a plethora of leopard-print garments throughout the drama, including tops, cardigans, and even coats, exuding a sense of sophistication and style. Additionally, leopard print was a distinctive style of dress in the 1980s. It is noteworthy that there are three instances in the drama where the character of Ra Mi-ran, also known as the "Leopard Lady," is depicted without wearing leopard print. One notable exception is that, prior to her eldest son's lottery wins and the subsequent acquisition of wealth for the family, the four-person household was forced to rent a doll. The family of four was compelled to lease a diminutive one-room apartment situated within the Dollfish domicile. At that time, Ra Mi-ran was attired in a floral blouse, identical to that worn by her two other sisters from less affluent families. Such attire may serve to reflect the hardship and difficulty of life during this period. Secondly, this was the period during which her eldest son, Zhengfeng, underwent a procedure to replace the batteries in his pacemaker. Her attire is a simple, unadorned dress, which serves to highlight her vulnerability.

The final occasion was when the matriarch was experiencing the symptoms of menopause. Her youngest son, Jung-hwan, was prompted to help when he observed her struggling daily. In the course of events, he discovered that the wedding photograph of his parents had been digitally altered. Consequently, he devises a plan for a surprise wedding. Ra Mi-ran changes into a light blue dress and smiles brightly, indicating that she no longer relies on leopard print to appear strong. The child has matured into a source of reliable support. Collectively, leopard print serves as the protective colour of the 'leopard lady'. The archetypal image of the strong mother was reintroduced into the present from the past; the maternal, sacrificial woman became

the ideal in both representation and discourse [7].

3. The Role of Female Image Design in the Explosion of the Show

The successful portrayal in the drama served to rekindle memories of the endearing and amiable Deok Sun. Similarly, the character of Bora, who initially appears to be high-strung, is revealed to possess a gentler disposition. Indeed, the principal female character of this drama is Sung Deok Sun. However, the portrayal of the other characters in the image design has also been well received. The distinction between supporting and principal characters is no longer applicable. In contrast, they are depicted as fully realised, flesh-and-blood characters. To illustrate, the leopard print worn by the character known as the "Leopard Lady" has prompted considerable debate.

The drama depicts the everyday life of the 1980s in a striking manner, with the characters' attire and makeup evoking memories and discussions among those who shared similar experiences. The retro style, evident in Deok-sun's "mummy trousers," Bo-ra's jeans, Na-mi-ran's leopard print, and the mothers' curly hairstyles, has been described as a "retro wave." The high-quality clothing depicted in these dramas also exerts a subtle influence on the aesthetic preferences and fashion trends observed in our country [8].

The portrayal of women in Korean television dramas is characterised by a modern, multifaceted, feminine and feminist representation. Sung Pao Ra is the most typical character in the play. She emphasises her individuality and challenges the traditional norms of patriarchal society for women. She is involved in the resistance movement at school and displays advanced critical thinking. She also engages in a calm and reasoned negotiation with her parents through the legal system when she gets married due to the 'same surname controversy'. She portrays a woman who has the courage to fight for her own rights and interests.

4. The Implications of Female Image Design in Korean Dramas for Female Image Design in Chinese TV Dramas

Firstly, the author collected a survey from 100 women in the age range of 20-50 years old about their views on the female characters in *Reply 1988*. There were 75 women in the age range of 20-30 years old, 15 women in the age range of 30-40 years old, and 10 women in the age range

of 40-50 years old. Among them they paid attention to the make-up in the drama 25, dresses 80, and hairstyles 76.

The survey showed that women in their 20s-30s paid more attention to the Korean drama 'Reply 1988'. Most of the women were most impressed by the character of Sung Deok Sun, followed by Ro Mi Ran. Strong correlations were shown for the personality aspects of their characters as well as their family backgrounds. For example, Deok-sun's optimistic attitude of being a beautiful person and Ms Leopard's wealthy family background. Furthermore, most of the women noticed the feminine design of the play in terms of dress and hairstyle. For example, the curly hair of the three Hutong sisters, Bo-ra's glasses to complement her schoolteacher image and the dress Deok-sun wore on her date. Finally, more than half of the women thought that the female image design in the drama was worth learning from Chinese TV dramas. Because of its closeness to life and fireworks.

This result is consistent with the expected results, possibly because young women are more design-conscious in terms of dress code. There is also the youthfulness of Korean drama communication. The fact that Reply 1988 was aired so soon is also a contributing factor.

The tvN gold drama 'Reply 1988', which kicked off the '90s youth meme craze, officially landed on China's video websites less than a month ago, setting a record of more than 100 million views, once again proving its popularity. China's mainstream video platform Aqiyi said today that since the drama 'Reply 1988' was launched, the total number of views from the first episode to the 20th episode has exceeded 100 million. Meanwhile, the drama received a rating of 8.6 out of 10 in the audience rating column. According to statistics, female viewers in the second half of the 10th generation and the first half of the 20th generation are the main audience. From the Chinese point of view, the relaxed political environment, geographical proximity, cultural similarities, etc. have created the conditions for the popularity of Korean dramas in China; from the Korean point of view, Korean culture makes people feel more intimate and freer from racial or ethnic prejudices often found in Western media. It also provides an excellent internal environment for the creation of Korean dramas and their export [9].

The image of women embodied in Korean dramas is popular among viewers not only because of the strengths of their own culture, but also because they have found a point of convergence between Chinese and Korean cultures. Chinese women have shown a keen interest in their unique love stories [10].

As a popular representative of popular culture, the image of women portrayed in Korean dramas is gradually breaking away from people's 'stereotypes' and satisfying people's emotional needs. Korean dramas also can resonate emotionally by arousing women [8]. Apart from the fact that the image design of the main female character is very important. The image design of the supporting characters is equally important. It can affect the 'ceiling' of the film and television drama. A good film and television drama should make every character flesh and blood, not an empty shell that connects the story.

Similarly, while Deok-sun's representative colour in the drama is yellow, Bo-ra's representative colour is purple. The two opposite shades of colour portray two very different images. Furthermore, they serve to emphasise and set off their characters, thus deepening the viewer's impression, as well as enriching the details of the plot and advancing its development.

Korean dramas continue to set new ratings, which is inextricably linked to the creativity of the writers. Most Korean drama writers are women. Writers and producers diversify female roles by portraying women in positions that demonstrate their intelligence, strength and independence [9]. The screenwriter of the 1988 film Please Answer is a woman. She employs a feminine narrative perspective in her portrayal of the story, which lends it a greater degree of dynamism, subtlety and impressiveness.

5. Conclusion

This paper investigates the relationship between the portrayal of women in drama and the dramatic growth in the popularity of such portrayals. To gain a deeper insight into the perceptions of women regarding the portrayal of women in the drama Reply 1988, a comprehensive survey was conducted utilising case studies and questionnaires. The findings demonstrate that the proliferation of drama is inextricably linked to the influence of female image design. The implementation of superior female image design can facilitate a more profound engagement with the narrative elements of a drama. The character of female characters can be discerned through their make-up, clothing, and hairstyles. The implementation of effective image design by stylists who treat both main and supporting characters with equal consideration can enhance the depth and complexity of the characters, thereby facilitating the progression of the drama.

To illustrate, an analysis of the role of makeup, clothing, and hairstyles in the characterization and development of the storyline of the drama Reply 1988 can be undertaken.

This analysis can then be used to elucidate the profound significance of the women's image design in the drama. As China and Korea are situated within the same East Asian cultural sphere, the stylistic trends popularised by Korean television dramas have also exerted an influence on the visual aesthetic preferences of Chinese audiences. Furthermore, these trends have served as a point of reference for Chinese television drama producers.

References

- [1] Huang, Mingzi, Yuchen He. "An Analysis of Characters' Personalities and Emotions in Korean TV Series Reply 1988." 3rd International Conference on Language, Communication and Culture Studies (ICLCCS 2022). Atlantis Press, 2022.
- [2] Keblinska, Julia. "Mediated Nostalgia: touching the past in Reply 1994." *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 9.2 (2017): 124-140.
- [3] Ahn, Sang-Won, and Hye-Bin Kim. "A study on the patterns of Recollection and the Desires of users in the drama 'Reply' series." *The Journal of the Korea Contents Association* 16.9 (2016): 679-693.
- [4] Elvira, Josephine, et al. Women Self-Image on Ji Sun Woo's Character in Korean Drama "The World of the Married". *Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Kebudayaan (Jurdikbud)* 2.1 (2022): 40-44.
- [5] Li, Muyun, and Zhongxuan Sun. "The Characteristics of Female Images in Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean Films and Television Works after 1990." 2022 8th International Conference on Humanities and Social Science Research (ICHSSR 2022). Atlantis Press, 2022.
- [6] Choe, Steve. "Sympathetic Distances: Twenty-Five Twenty-One and K-Drama Poetics." *Situations: Cultural Studies in the Asian Context* 17.1 (2024): 1-24.
- [7] Cho, Michelle, and Jesook Song. *Mediating gender in post-authoritarian South Korea*. University of Michigan Press, 2024.
- [8] Dai, Siyan, et al. "Korean Drama'S Influence on China'S Fashion Industry and Culture." 2021 4th International Conference on Humanities Education and Social Sciences (ICHESS 2021). Atlantis Press, 2021.
- [9] Tahreb, Nurus Syahidah, et al. "The Perpetuation of Negative Stereotypes about Women in selected Korean Dramas." *Gading Journal for Social Sciences (e-ISSN 2600-7568)* 27.2 (2024): 159-170.
- [10] Ju, Hyejung. "Korean TV drama viewership on Netflix: Transcultural affection, romance, and identities." *Journal of international and intercultural communication* 13.1 (2020): 32-48.