

Study on the Expression of National Culture and the Portrayal of Female Characters in Film Literature

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ABSTRACT

Film, this canvas woven of light and shadow, has never been merely a storytelling machine. It is deeply rooted in the soil of a specific culture, breathing the spirit of a nation. Women on screen often become the most sensitive and powerful carriers of this spirit. They are mothers, daughters, rebels, and protectors. Their destinies and inner worlds, like a prism, reflect the texture of national culture, the scars of history, and the tremors and quests faced by the tides of time. This article explores the complex relationship between "roots" and "wings" in film, which both nourishes and competes with each other. A close examination of significant film texts reveals that national culture is more than superficial embellishment. It is hidden in the legends recounted by the elderly, in the complex rituals of weddings and funerals, in the customs nurtured by local conditions, and even more so in the invisible rules and beliefs that constrain people's behavior. These "roots" profoundly influence what women in film can and should do, empowering them while also drawing an invisible circle. Conversely, the women on screen—their bodies, their struggles, their silences or cries—have become the most vivid symbols that speak to, protect, and even challenge these "roots." From being categorized as "virtuous wives and mothers" or "female troublemakers" in the early years to increasingly complex portrayals of women living their own lives, the evolution of female characters is itself a microcosm of the national psyche. Ultimately, understanding the symbiosis and struggle between "roots" and "wings" is not only about understanding film, but also about understanding ourselves. In today's world where globalization threatens to smooth everything over, how can the art of film, through the stories of women, both preserve a nation's unique soul and grow wings for free flight.

KEYWORDS

Film Literature; National Culture; Female Image; Cultural Expression; Gender Shaping; Symbol, Identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

From the moment film emerged, it held far more weight than simply being a spectacle. Like a living specimen, it's imbued with the dreams, scabby scars, stubborn beliefs, and lingering desires that are unique to this region. As the world becomes increasingly entangled, filmmakers everywhere feel a pang of anxiety: How can we tell this story, preserving our own unique spirit?

Of all the stories, those about women are particularly heartbreaking and intriguing. Their on-screen portrayal is never a whim of the director. They are pushed by an invisible hand—a hand steeped in cultural norms: what should women be like? What can they do? Is sacrifice natural? What room is there for resistance? Looking at the mothers in old films who endured humiliation and the vulnerable women at the mercy of fate, and then at later characters who dared to love and hate, even to the point of being somewhat "rebellious," the shifting portrayals of women act like a ruler, measuring the shift in society's view of women and the oscillation of culture itself in the clash of old and new.

Thus, it's crucial to examine the "roots" of national culture and the "wings" of female images in film together. It can help us:

peel back the surface of the story and see how the cultural "script" sets the tone for female characters; see how women themselves become living carriers of cultural values, historical memories, and even expose the "hidden wounds" within culture;

especially in today's age of rapid change, the struggles and awakenings of women on screen are often the most direct and poignant echoes of the impact faced by an entire culture.

This article seeks to follow this thread and explore the depths of the entanglement between culture and gender in film.

2. THE "SEEDS" OF NATIONAL CULTURE: HOW THEY TAKE ROOT AND SPROUT IN MOVIES

Films that explore national culture shouldn't rely solely on labeling. The more effective approach is to allow the "seeds" of culture to grow naturally within the fabric of the story.

The stories and customs passed down by our ancestors are the finest nourishment. Think of how many times "The Legend of the White Snake" has been remade? The human-demon entanglement and the flavor of karma and reincarnation in it embody the cosmology inherent in the Eastern worldview. Well-filmed, old stories can also sprout new thorns, piercing the numb nerves of modern people. Rituals, grand or trivial-a boisterous Chinese wedding banquet, a rural funeral, or even the mundane task of delivering a letter across mountains and hills, as in "The Mountain, the Man, the Dog"-are not idle tropes. They are like living fossils, revealing how specific groups of people live and interact with each other, and how rules and loyalty clash in the details.

The locations in films are more than just backdrops. The loess land, the waters of the south of the Yangtze River, old factory districts, new urban areas... these spaces, when gazed upon by the camera, take on a soul[1]. The desolation and bustle of a small Shanxi city captured by Jia Zhangke's lens are more than just scenes. They are fragments shed by the dramatic shifts of an entire era, imbued with the sense of weightlessness felt by countless ordinary people. Deeper lies the "invisible rules." For example, the Confucian ideals of filial piety and the importance of family above all else become the weights that weigh on the characters' choices, whether at the family dinner table in "Eat Drink Man Woman" or amidst the tears of two generations in "So Long, My Son." The Taoist ideals of harmony between man and nature and following the natural flow imbue the shots and actions of "The Assassin" with an ethereal and restrained energy. These ideals, deeply embedded in the very fabric of culture, are the undercurrents that anchor the story and bring the characters to life.

3. THE "PORTRAIT" OF WOMEN: FROM TEMPLATE TO LIVING PERSON

Looking back at women in film, for a long time, they seemed cast according to a few fixed molds.

The most common was the "good woman" model: selfless, devoted, pure, and resilient, like the wife and mother in early revolutionary films who silently shouldered the burden of the family, the embodiment of morality and stability. At the other extreme was the "bad woman" model: beautiful, but a source of trouble, her desires and opinions inherently destructive and a must-guard against. Then there was the "waiting to be rescued" model: vulnerable and helpless, with a tragic fate, whose primary purpose was to bolster the hero's heroic spirit. These molds, to put it bluntly, are the grids long-established for women in a culture centered around men.

Thankfully, times are changing, and so are the mindsets of filmmakers. Women on screen are beginning to break free from these molds, becoming fleshed out and full of character. First, films are beginning to explore women's hearts[2]. They are no longer just tools to advance the plot. Their desires, fears, calculations, and dreams are being peeled away layer by layer, like an onion. Xiao Hong in "The Golden Age" writes with a pen as fervent as her burning passion, clinging to her life even as she stumbles through turbulent times. Secondly, women are beginning to make their own decisions. Yu Jiaolong in "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" disregards the rules of the underworld and the lingering sentiments of love, willing to sacrifice her life for a sense of wild freedom, completely overturning the traditional trope of women surrounding men in martial arts films. Furthermore, women's worlds have broadened. Films no longer focus on just one type of woman. "Finding You" brings together mothers from different social classes, each with their own challenges and fierceness; "Spring Tide" shows three generations of women living under one roof, their love, hate, and resentment tangled in a tangle of emotions. Women's value is no longer simply tied to labels like "who's wife" or "who's mother." They are increasingly being recognized as they strive in society, shine in their professions, and journey independently in their spiritual worlds.

4. THE INTERTWINING OF ROOTS AND WINGS: CULTURE SHAPES WOMEN, AND WOMEN TELL CULTURE

In films, ethnic culture and female images, like vines and trees, intertwine and grow together. The cultural "roots" are deeply embedded in the fates of female characters; the female "wings" become the culture's most vivid and powerful storytellers.

Cultural traditions often act like invisible cages. The strictures of "virtuous wives and good mothers" in East Asian films, and the women's adherence to and struggle with religious precepts in Tibetan films, all reflect cultural disciplines. Their individual desires often find a way to survive between "family," "clan," and "faith," and their joys and sorrows often stem from either submission or silent resistance to these constraints. Women's bodies are often requisitioned as "living showcases" of culture. Whether it's the elegance of cheongsams and kimonos, the splendor of saris, or the unique patterns of Tibetan women's clothing, they envelop not only the body but also an entire system of aesthetics and gender norms. Their songs, dances, and crafts have all become living symbols of culture.

But are women on screen content to be mere inscribed stones? They are often living beings carrying the blood of culture, yet also shadows clinging to old conventions. Films that tell ancestral stories often feature elderly women, relying on reiterated tales and the honed skills of their fingers to pick up and tangle up the fraying threads of a story. More importantly, when cultures collide, women are often at the breaking point. When old conventions collide with the new, nine out of ten times they are the ones to suffer the consequences[3]. In Tibetan director Pema Tseden's "Talo," the short-haired, neatly dressed shepherdess Yang Xiucuo stands before the stubborn Talo, like a screwdriver piercing the old conventions—without words, her very presence asks: Do women have to be cast in the same mold? Qiu Yun in "Human·Ghost·Love" is even more amazing. She is obsessed with playing the male ghost Zhong Kui. Singing is her soul, but this soul can only burn vigorously after getting into a man's skin. Her stubbornness reveals the knot in the cultural roots, the stubborn knot between art and womanhood that refuses to let go. The movie uncovers the humiliation a woman endured at the stove, the setbacks she suffered at work, the gates of hell when giving birth, the punches she received... These bloody true stories are like a needle piercing old scars, forcing people to see clearly, think, and change their way of life.

5. LEARNING FROM OTHERS: WOMEN THROUGH THE CULTURAL FILTER

Step outside your own comfort zone and take a look. Films from different regions depicting women differ dramatically, all thanks to the thick "cultural filter" behind them.

In East Asia, cinematic roots are deeply rooted in Confucian etiquette, Shinto reverence, and the belief that the collective is more important than the individual. Women, especially mothers, are practically deified-selfless and sacrificial, the anchor that holds a family together. A woman's personal aspirations? They must first overcome the hurdles of "family" and "reputation." Even if she aspires to fly, she must hold her wings back, cultivate reserve, and find glimpses of breath amidst her endurance.

When it comes to European and American cinema, the flavor changes. Their roots lie in the heroic spirit of individualism passed down from ancient Greece, the "I think, therefore I am" ignited by the Enlightenment, and an innate aversion to meddling. Women in films are independent, strong-willed, and stubborn, often defying established conventions. The two women in "Thelma and Louise" hit the accelerator and flee for their lives. The mother in "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri" fights the entire town to the bitter end for her daughter's death-they all embody the relentless spirit of "my life, my own decision." Hollywood's trope of individual heroism is often cast on women, who single-handedly carve out a bloody path.

Indian cinema presents a different landscape, entrenched in religious overtones, the lingering shadow of caste, and the constant clash between old traditions and new trends. Women? They stand at the center of this arena. In Bollywood romantic blockbusters, the heroines are often portrayed as the embodiment of pure, loyal, and selfless "goddesses," radiantly beautiful[4]. But then, films like "The Heat" expose the nascent wounds of child marriage, dowry deaths, and sexual assault, all exposed with gory intensity. The most radiant hallmarks of Indian culture-song and dance-are mostly performed by women. Those gorgeous saris and moving gyrations are displays of national pride, but even as the camera sweeps across the dancing bodies, a gaze of scrutiny and discipline is hidden within. These vastly different "women's plays" tell us: what a woman on screen looks like, where she soars, and how high she soars all depends on the ground beneath her feet, called "culture": whether it's sandy or muddy, loose or hard. Only by observing others and reflecting on ourselves can we understand the color of our own "filters."

6. CURRENT DILEMMA AND THOUGHTS ON BREAKING THROUGH

The world is accelerating, and technology is advancing at breakneck speed. Films must be deeply rooted in cultural traditions while also allowing female characters to soar freely-a difficult feat. The first hurdle is avoiding the trap of novelty hunting. To attract international attention and sell more tickets, some films have woven a kaleidoscopic blend of national symbols-kung fu, cheongsams, mystical rituals-into a chaotic jumble. Women are portrayed as symbols fulfilling Eastern fantasies, mysterious and sensual. This has stripped culture of its soul, and women have become mere figurines. The second challenge is withstanding the onslaught of Hollywood's "female heroine." Their template for independent women is universally accepted, and failing to emulate it can easily lead to the loss of our own unique identity. Amidst the tide of popular trends, we must fiercely protect the essence of local culture. The third challenge is the changing audience. With the internet, all sorts of ideas are readily available, especially among young people, who often have a discerning eye. The film must be able to stand firm on its old roots while also being able to respond to their questioning of the old rules, and realistically show how difficult and complicated life is for women..

Break the impasse? One must forge their own path. The key lies in two key principles: let the cultural "roots" grow deeply into the story, and let the "wings" of women shed labels and flutter freely.

How do good films be made? Take "The Grandmaster." Gong Er's unwavering determination, insisting on a persistent pursuit, resonates with her kung fu, where she cultivates the realm of "seeing oneself, the universe, and all beings." Her unwavering commitment has long transcended the norms of "what a woman should be," becoming the embodiment of the spirit of the martial arts world. This is more effective than a hundred "female knight" labels[5]. The director must possess a deep understanding of the cultural roots and empathize with the plight of women. We must dare to capture the diverse lives of women-not just those who suffer, but also those who make decisions, create, act mischievously, and find their way. We must see how the lives of women from different classes and places differ; we must unearth the unyielding spirit within them. Like the Shanghai women in "Love Mythology," they engage in romance, the daily grind, and a sense of contentment yet a touch of calculation, effortlessly shattering the stereotype of middle-aged women confined to the kitchen. Cinematic language must also keep pace, learning new techniques from around the world while also cultivating our own unique expressions. Use lingering blank spaces, long shots, and unique rhythms to highlight women's inner thoughts and destinies. Or, employ multi-threaded narratives and multiple perspectives to allow diverse female voices to be heard, breaking the cliché of "only one truth."

This elaboration isn't just for the sake of making the film a good watch. More profoundly, it helps us see clearly how film, a popular art form, can not only tell national stories but also contribute to shaping a more respectable way of life-one where unique cultural roots can be sustained and every woman (and man) can live with dignity and freedom. This quest in light and shadow illuminates the path to reality.

7. CONCLUSION

As I've reviewed these films, a feeling has become increasingly clear: within the realm of film and literature, the "old roots" of national culture and the "new wings" of female figures are inextricably intertwined. They entwine like vines, tripping and tugging, each shoring up the other, each feeding off the other's energy in their struggle. These cultural "roots" run deep. Through the legends of the past, everyday rituals, the very soil beneath our feet, and above all, through those invisible yet weighty ideals, they frame the terrain and script the fate of the women on screen. They empower them, yet also shackle them. And these "wings" of women are by no means passive ornaments. They carry cultural symbols with their bodies, safeguard memories with their actions, and, in times of dramatic change, become the most sensitive nerve endings within culture. Their struggles, compromises, awakenings, and even destruction are often the sharpest blades that films use to pierce the scars of national history, ethical dilemmas, and gender power structures. From being pinned down as "angels" or "temptes" in the early years to today's increasingly mature and complex portrayals, the transformation of female characters is itself an electrocardiogram of a national culture choking on the tide of modernization, struggling, and attempting rebirth.

The challenges we face are numerous. The global market is vying for attention, making it easy to turn cultural symbols into shallow local specialties and portray women as tourist attractions. Hollywood's glittering "independent heroine" persona is so alluring that it can drown out the subtle nuances of our own culture. Audiences are becoming increasingly discerning, demanding that you preserve the spirit of tradition while also confronting modern challenges and revealing the real wrinkles of women's lives.

The key to breaking through this dilemma, ultimately, lies in the creator's deep understanding of "roots" and the human spirit. Don't just treat cultural symbols as embellishments embroidered on clothing; let them become part of the very fabric of the story. Stop labeling women as "virtuous" and "independent." Let's show them as living beings, with their calculations, weaknesses, explosive power, and confusion. Film language needs to be updated, but the purpose of this update is to more accurately capture the unique atmosphere of this land and the depths of the female soul.

Ultimately, the ongoing exploration of the intertwining of "roots" and "wings" in film has far more significance than academic interest. It compels filmmakers, and all of us who watch films, to constantly ask: What kind of "us" do we want to see on screen? Is it a vision of the future that is deeply rooted in unique cultural traditions while also allowing each individual to enjoy dignity and the space to soar? The light of film may not illuminate all the answers, but it can at least help us see the path ahead and the possibilities beyond.

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