

**Confucianism and the Rise of Feminism's Impact on the Image of Female Figures in  
Chinese Television and Films**

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## Abstract

This research examines the representation of Chinese women and gender relations in seven Chinese films and a television drama. My case studies include *The Goddess* (1934), *New Women* (1935), *Song of Youth* (1959), *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961), *Hibiscus Town* (1986), *Women Human Demon* (1987), *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019), and the television drama *Nothing but Thirty* (2020). These works overlap with four significant historical eras in China: The Republican era, the Mao era, the post-Mao era, and the post-2000 era, which reflect the impact of socio-political changes on gender in traditional Confucian Chinese society over time. The Republican era marked the end of the imperial system in China and the entrance of feminism, making this an important date to commence my research. The Mao era that followed was characterized by political movements aimed at mobilizing women to achieve a Maoist socialist society. Thereafter, the post-Mao era witnessed an enhancement of gender equality due to social reform and economic growth. Finally, the post-2000 era has seen a rapid increase in the perception of equal gender rights with the popularization of the internet. This research employs a qualitative research methodology using a textual analysis. In addition, the tapping into Confucian gender concepts and feminist theories such as Laura Mulvey's (1975) *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Simone de Beauvoir's (1953) *The Second Sex*, and Chinese feminism will help examine how women's images and gender relations, formed by Confucianism, have changed in Chinese patriarchal society throughout four eras. The research findings reveal an increased representation of active and independent women and relatively increased equal rights in Chinese society. Chinese women have gradually discarded the passive and dependent roles emphasising kinship and reliance on men. Additionally, female protagonists in post-Mao and post-2000 eras are portrayed as autonomous and active individuals in society who seek personal fulfilment and fight against patriarchal rules.

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### **Attestation of Authorship**

I hereby declare that this thesis submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Jie Deng

Dated: 28. Mar. 2023

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Throughout Chinese history women have been viewed as subordinate to men. The masculine value system developed in Chinese society over thousands of years, which formed the patriarchal structure and led men to hold power and rights in the household and world (Leung, 2003). With the increasing influence of the Westernised world however, this ideology has seen changes that have effectively improved the rights and status of women. The May Fourth movement of 1919 openly discussed women's issues, including free marriage, the right of inheritance, and women's education, all of which were influenced by a Western perspective of modernization (Li & Zhang, 1994). Taking this into account, and as a female Chinese media communications student, I wanted to look at how the image of women has changed across time, and how the gendered relations between men and women within China has been represented in Chinese film and television shows. Using the lens of Confucian and Chinese Feminist concepts, I examine four time periods: the Republican era, Mao era, post-Mao era, and post-2000 era. Gender issues and the rise of feminism in China have drawn widespread concern regarding the level of sexism, sexual harassment, and sexual violence within contemporary Chinese society, stemming from their traditional system of patriarchy that is found in Confucianism, which is the ancient Chinese belief system (Yin & Sun, 2021). What I have found is that Chinese women in society are consistently portrayed in an interdependent kin-ship-related role that works alongside Confucian gender ideology. As such the women are subordinate to men, including their fathers, husbands, and sons in her different life stages (Roseleen, 2006). In turn, the portrayal of women protagonists in the films show some deviations to the normal status quo of the time, as they can be seen to work against the traditional Confucian concepts. The approach to Feminist concepts in the films are represented in the form of physically and psychologically independent women. These women have an active consciousness of their place in society showing the rise of feminism and social reform in contemporary Chinese society (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002). I explore gender relations and examine how women interact with men in both domestic and the public sphere and this is a critical factor that reflects the social status of women within a patriarchal society.

In this research I look at the representation of women and the gender relations pertaining to the female protagonists in Chinese film and television. The texts are carefully selected from the four distinct eras of Chinese history: *The Goddess* (1934) and *New Women* (1935) during the Republican era; *Song of Youth* (1959) and *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961) during Mao era; *Hibiscus Town* (1986) and *Woman Human Demon* (1987) during post-Mao era; and *Send Me*

*to the Clouds* (2019) and the television drama *Nothing but Thirty* (2020) during the Post-2000 era. The awakening of women's consciousness, the enhancing of women's social status, and the balancing of gender relations has become more obvious in contemporary Chinese society since the entry of Feminism in early twentieth-century (Dong & Kang, 2022). The changing trend of women's representation and gender relations is observed through the examination of selected female protagonists of the eight texts which spans over a hundred years in China, through the Confucian and Chinese feminist theories. I conduct my examination to investigate how Confucianism continues to shape the role and status of women in Chinese society, even in the present day, and how Chinese women and women's rights are gradually changing and benefiting from the rise of Feminist gender concepts.

### 1.1 The development and rationale of my research concept

My research topic came to fruition because of the constant issue of discrimination toward women in China. These concerns are frequently seen on Weibo as the hot topics in the Chinese social media platform. This platform is like that of Facebook, and it has sparked an intense online debate about gender since early 2010. In recent years, a notable portion of Chinese female netizens have showcased a feminist informed attitude towards men, driven by a heightened recognition of the psychological and physiological oppressions they have historically endured within gender dynamics. This awareness has led them to adopt a more defensive stance in contemporary interactions between genders. Furthermore, there is a growing trend among the young generation on Chinese social media to ridicule men. I have also noticed that female images and gender relations in Chinese film and television are different from what I observed during my youth. The female characters seem to be more determined and courageous than before, achieving their goals, and showing less dependence on men to get what they need or want. In my youth, the Chinese films showed female protagonists who were seen to be waiting for their 'Prince Charming' to save them from either plight or poverty. However, in the present-day, the female protagonists can be seen, for example, to leave their disloyal male partners and become fulfilled in their life through the joy of self-achievement. An example can be seen in the show *Empresses in the Palace* (2011), which is the story of Zhen Huan who manages to use her intelligence to ultimately become the empress and then seeks revenge against the emperor. The success of this drama has opened female representation in the film and television industry in China, with strong female leads being featured since 2011. Seeing this change in the representation of women in their relationships on screen piqued my interest to look into what was the rationale for this happening, and how these changes related to gender relations in both China at the time, and the traditionally patriarchal Chinese media.

Women's rights are a significant topic for women in every generation, as most Chinese women experience gender discrimination within society and their family homes. In my childhood memory, my grandmother often complained that our family did not have a male child. Despite this, my childhood was still full of love from my family because I am the only child. However, many young women are not being treated equally if their families have male children in them. The common phenomenon of women experiencing gender discrimination in family and society is not solely a China issue, as this is still experienced in many other Asian countries. Gender equality is essential in a civilised society, and sexism has led to women losing their fundamental rights to explore the world and have a meaningful life. Therefore, as a young Chinese woman studying media and films in New Zealand, I started to explore the rationales and changes of gender concepts and feminism in Chinese films and television, which could help me understand the gender issues in my country from both Chinese and Western perspectives.

There is a gap in the research exploring the era of Post-2000 and the linking of women and gender relations to the previous eras. Moreover, the trends found regarding the representation of Chinese women and other such gender relations from the beginning of the rise of Feminism in China until the present is also lacking research. Therefore, my study delves into the four eras from the early twentieth century up to the present, and hopes to fill some of the gaps in research into the trend of Chinese women in film and television from the Republican era to the Post-2000 era.

## 1.2 Historical Background

In the first half of the 20th century, China was turbulent and tumultuous; the fall and end of the lengthy imperial period, the destructive war within and beyond the mainland, the rise and decline of the democratic Chinese society's pioneer— Republic, and the creation of the new China— The People's Republic of China. Through these times, women and women's rights were only brought to the fore in the early twentieth century, when people began to realise the need for women as a crucial component of society, and because of the influences of Western society and their gender ideologies.

Chinese society is historically patriarchal because of the deep-rooted Confucian morality of 'filial piety' that places a woman in a complementary but inferior status to men. This was done to contain the well-ordered and harmonious social relations and atmosphere (Roseleen, 2006). The Feminist movement and the liberation of women's rights were formally introduced to the country in the Republican era after the western-educated revolutionary Sun Yat-sen overthrew the Qing dynasty (Murdock, 2016). This was the last imperial dynasty in Chinese history, and he formed a provisional government in 1911 through the Chinese revolution (Xinhai revolution). Both the government and society had witnessed the power of women in the community, and thus the rights of women began to gain some ground in Chinese society. The people widely promoted and

accepted diverse perspectives of changing the outmoded society; women were encouraged to escape the image of the 'traditional woman' and convinced to be independent, educated, and patriotic (Edwards, 2000). The word for 'woman' in the Chinese language was modified from the kinship-related term 'funu 妇女' to the neutral term 'nuxing 女性' during the movement in May 4th, 1919, and this alteration helped to transform some of the old Confucian gender beliefs (Edwards, 2000). The two terms are used in slightly different contexts and carry nuanced meanings. "Funu 妇女" typically emphasizes women's societal or cultural aspects and is often used to refer to women collectively, especially in the context of social roles. On the other hand, "Nuxing 女性" is a more neutral and general term used to refer to women, applicable in a broader context that includes aspects beyond societal roles and issues. However, further advancements in the Feminist movement ultimately was postponed and suspended in the turbulent period of experiencing the Chinese Civil War and the Second Sino-Japanese War.

Zedong Mao, the chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, widely promoted socialist reform in mainland China after the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949. Simultaneously, the liberation of women had become a core target in Chinese socialist development promoted by Chairman Mao and the Chinese Communist Party, whereby the women in the population joined the labour force to build up the new Chinese nation (Wielink, 2019). However, the education of Maoist socialist ideology for building the nation became radical after Chairman Mao launched the socio-economic campaign called 'Great Leap Forward' 大跃进 in 1958 (Li & Yang, 2005). Mao promoted agricultural collectives to benefit industrialization, but this led to famine in the country (Li & Yang, 2005). Women were forced to go into the farmland to support the family in the collectivization period; meanwhile, their obligation within the family did not reduce (Wielink, 2019). Moreover, the decade-long socio-political movement 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' (1966-1976) was launched by Mao with the target of weeding out remnants of capitalist and traditional concepts (Clark, 2008). The movement aimed to consolidate the Chinese Communist Party's position in China, mobilizing women to participate in political struggles and prioritizing collective effort (Jin, 2006).

The Chinese Economic Reform, led by the chairman of the Fifth National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Xiaoping Deng, helped the Chinese economy but it also brought numerous changes in the society. Under the premise of rapid economic growth in China, the China Women's Federation and society shifted the focus from political struggle to women's issues, which led to a formalised establishment of women's studies as its own discipline (Li, 2000). Later, the government launched the 'One-child Policy' to control the population growth in China. This meant that each couple in a family were restricted to having only one child. The result of this legislation led to a significant increase in infanticide as people were desperate to ensure that the only child of the family was a boy (Goeking, 2019). Although this was highly

questionable legislation, the girls began to receive more opportunities in life, getting access to higher education and increased attention within their families and the greater society after the government prohibited infanticide (Goeking, 2019). In twenty-first century, China, Chinese women from the young generations have entered the centre of the feminist movements and actively protest and voice their opinions in the strive for gender equality (Wang, 2018a).

### 1.2.1 Chinese women in Confucianism

Confucianism, the ethical philosophy, and social system of China has been the foundation of much of Chinese and East Asian countries' traditions since ancient times (Goldin, 2011, p. 1). The philosophy was developed by Confucius, or Kǒng Fūzǐ 孔夫子, an ancient Chinese philosopher and the first self-conscious teacher of the Chinese Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC). Confucius's ideas were recorded in the book called *The Analects*<sup>1</sup> by his students, and his ideas shaped the Chinese people's cognition and behaviours for thousands of years (Xie et al., 2021). The cultivation of virtues in people to form a morally well-ordered world is the core target of Confucian concepts, which embraces the five virtues of ren (benevolence), Yi (righteousness), li (rites), Zhi (wisdom), and xin (trustworthiness) for exhibiting and enabling self-transcendence (Littlejohn, 2010, p. xxii). However, Confucianism has been associated as one of the triggers of gender oppression and the patriarchal society in China (Rosenlee, 2006; Littlejohn, 2010; Foust & Tan, 2016).

Confucianism greatly emphasises achieving balance and harmony in human relationships and society. This emphasis on balance resonates with the yin-yang concept, which also underscores the interplay and harmony of opposing forces. Moreover, Confucianism strongly accentuates the roles of both men and women within society, stressing the significance of nurturing proper relationships within families and the broader community. This alignment can be connected to the yin-yang concept's acknowledgment of the complementary roles played by yin (feminine) and yang (masculine) in the world. The 'Yin-yang' concept is the fundamental construction of gender and gender division of labour (Rosenlee, 2006, p.35), which identifies women and men as two opposite but complementary ideas within a cosmic harmony (Clark & Wang, 2004). The opposite but complementary ideas can refer to the ideas of 'soft and hard' and 'light and dark' but ideologically place women at an inferior status to men. Gao (2003) states that women are identified as 'inferior men' in Confucianism, who are unable to communicate, and were suggested to be passed over in silence. There is the saying that Confucius depreciates women as men with a narrow-minded attitude of male dominance; meanwhile, the discrimination against women in *The Analects* led to exclude women from cultural and social practices (Littlejohn, 2010). The rare

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<sup>1</sup> *The book of Analects* is the most known and followed book of scripture in China that includes the ideas and sayings of Confucius. It is part of the *Four Books of Confucianism* and is one of the most widely studied books in China. These writings were originally found in a tomb in 55BC.

ancient literature for women- *The Four Books for Women*<sup>2</sup> was also influenced by the Confucian notion that outlines women's life as domestic, repressive, and powerless, which traps women in domestic tasks (Gao, 2003).

Confucian principles contributed to oppressive practices and sexist cultures, such as foot binding, concubinage, and widow suicide (Nuyen, 2010). The principles emphasized rigid gender roles and hierarchical relationships within the family and society, which propagated the concept of the "Three Obedience and Four Virtues" concept, delineating women's subordinate roles. Foot binding was regarded as a method to solidify these gender roles, as it rendered women physically reliant on men for assistance and movement. Additionally, foot binding was occasionally rationalized as a means for women to exhibit filial piety, demonstrating their commitment to enduring pain and sacrifice to uphold their families' honour and reputation. Rosenlee (2006) demonstrates that the familial virtue of filial piety, the continuity of the family name, and ancestor worship are three cultural imperatives highlighted in Confucian virtue, which forms gender oppression in China because the man is "the only bearer of the family name in this patrilineal system" (p. 122). Under the premise of male privilege in the familial system, women in the family line work solely as producers for the male heir in the continuity of the family (Zhan & Montgomery, 2003). Moreover, women were only remembered in their kinship titles of their husband's family lineage, which neglects them as a person (Rosenlee, 2006, p.127). Women who received an education and developed personal skills outside the household was identified as violating the virtue (Zhan & Liu, 2012). Women in Confucianism are kinship-related roles of daughter, wife, and mother who subordinate the men in different stage of her life span.

### 1.2.2 Differences between Chinese Feminism and Western Feminism

Cole and Zucker (2007) suggest that different feminist groups pursue distinctive values of feminism under different historical and cultural backgrounds. Chinese feminism holds similar values to Western feminism but is slightly different in that feminism in China can be translated into two different forms. They are the word womanism (女性主义), which centres on women's issues and gender relations, and women's-rights-ism (女权主义), emphasising women's rights, which remains in a plural translation for representing the changing of feminist consciousness with social development (Zhu & Xiao, 2021, p.1) The primary differences found between Chinese and Western feminism is in the identification of gender. Rather than the kinship-neutral term, 'gender' in Chinese is interpreted as a coextensive role that links with the society (Spakowski, 2011). Therefore, the division of roles in the family and workplace between men and women is often a topic that focuses on Chinese feminist movements, while equal rights in the educational,

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<sup>2</sup> Written during the Chinese feudal society, these books included *The Admonitions for Women*; *The Women's Analects*; *The Domestic Lessons*; and *the Sketch of a Modern Woman*.

political, and public spheres are crucial (Zhang & Li, 2015). Moreover, the female consciousness of feminist concepts in the Chinese cultural context differs from the West. Chinese society is a collective that promotes collective goals for the community, while individualism of the Western society values personal achievement and rights (Triandis, 2002). The different cultural background contributes to a divergent female consciousness whereby Chinese women have a strong collective consciousness; therefore, more willing to undertake the responsibilities and obligations that are delivered from the community (Meng, 2018). However, although there are differences in the concepts of feminism in China and the west, they are all focussed on pursuing equal rights and opportunities for women.

### 1.2.3 Chinese Cinema in history

The film industry entered China in the early twentieth century and centred in the biggest city, Shanghai, during this early period (Rea, 2021). During the first decades of cinema in China, the Republican era, cinemas were influenced by leftist political efforts which reflected the socio-political issues in the society of the time (Berry, 1989). The issues observed in films mainly relate to people at the lower-class level of society, who receive poor treatment due to their gender, occupation, and familial background. As the women's liberation was promoted by Western-influenced Chinese intellectuals in the early twentieth century in China, gender issues were one of the targets of leftist movies. The leftist cinematic movement set the stage for the first 'Golden Period' of the Chinese film industry (Hong, 2009), and Shanghai became the centre of popular culture with multi-social and political genres of films.

The Chinese film industry experienced the brunt of the negative impacts of the Sino-Japanese war and civil war during the early 1940s. Some film producers relocated to Hong Kong and Taiwan, and Chinese cinema was separated into different areas (Zhang, 2016). After the founding of the People's Republic of China by the Chinese communist party (CCP), which has played a pivotal role in shaping China's modern history, politics, and society, in 1949, rigorous film censorship was set up by the CCP, and all film companies became state-owned corporations under the control of the CCP (Bai, 2013). Films in the Mao era gradually became a propaganda tool for mentally and physically moulding the Chinese population into the proletariat, which limits the storytelling of resistant Chinese communists and the great Chinese communist party during the Sino-Japanese war and Chinese civil war (Chen, 2003). The monotonous theme of films covered almost the entire film industry in mainland China and became aggravated in the ten years Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 (McGrath, 2010).

After the Cultural Revolution and the Mao era had ended in the late 1970s, Chinese film took a turn for the better. Filmmakers were eager to show their talent in filmmaking. 'Scar films' emerged, depicting the Chinese masses' rough life in the Cultural Revolution, and the ten years

of chaos. These themes became more topical with more Chinese filmmakers courageously confronting the socio-political social issues through their masterpieces (Morag, 2020). However, the free speech of filmmakers unfortunately ended at the end of the twentieth century due to the renewed restrictions placed in the post-2000 era. Films either shot in China or imported from overseas had to receive a permit from film regulatory before airing (Leung & Lee, 2019). Even though China is now the second largest film producing country behind the United States, ‘socialist core values’ have taken root in Chinese films stemming from the ‘soft power’ that remains unchangeable in Chinese films (Su, 2010).

### 1.3 Research Questions and Development

This research arises because gender and gender equality are trending topics in contemporary Chinese social media, which have sparked debate among netizens. There are also a number of femicentric series that have been produced one after the other in the Chinese film and television industries, which gradually became big hits among the Chinese audience in recent years. For instance, *Ode to Joy* (2016) and *Nothing but Thirty* (2020) are contemporary urban dramas focusing on a group of women who come from different walks of life and face different challenges in a modern city. There are also many historical dramas centred around a female protagonist, depicting her revenge story, such as *The Legend of Mi Yue* (2015) and *Story of Yanxi Palace* (2018). I have been wondering how Chinese women were historically presented in motion pictures of earlier eras and how women and women’s interaction with the community has changed in the traditionally patriarchal Chinese society. Therefore, this research is an examination of the shift in feminist representation over time from the early twentieth century to the present. Confucianism and feminism are two core ideologies that affect Chinese people’s cognition toward women and gender and behaviours in the community over this time. Confucianism is the fundamental philosophy for much of the Chinese traditions and culture, and the primary aim of maintaining harmonious relations that leads to the societal patriarchal norms (Roseleen, 2006). Feminism entered China in the late 19th to early 20th century, which redefined gender ideologies and women in China (Croll, 1978). Thus, in this research I investigate how both ideologies have subtly influenced Chinese women and gender relations.

The two primary research questions set out to guide my study on the effects of Confucianism and feminism across the four selected eras, are that of Chinese women’s representation and gender relations in Chinese women-centered film and television after considering the distinct socio-political backgrounds:

1. How are the Chinese women portrayed in the Chinese films or television of the eras?
2. How do these female figures support or oppose Confucianism and feminism over each era of the Republican, Mao, Post-Mao, and Post-2000?

The research questions led me to use a close textual analysis of the research topics in the eight selected texts from the four eras. The study aims to associate films and television with the wider socio-political background of Confucianism and feminism; therefore, I selected two films and television of each era for this research to observe and analyse. The films and television are:

- *The Goddess* (1934) and *New Women* (1935) -- Republican era
- *Song of Youth* (1959) and *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961) -- Mao era
- *Hibiscus Town* (1986) and *Woman Demon Human* (1987) -- Post-Mao era
- *Send Me to the Cloud* (2019) and television series- *Nothing but Thirty* (2020) --Post-2000 era

The study focuses on the close 'reading' of the films and television series from one era to another. It offers insights into Chinese female-centred texts to help to discover how Chinese socio-political contexts shaped the female figures in the film or television programmes at a certain period, and how the female protagonists in these texts support or opposed Confucianism and/or feminism. McKee (2003) states that textual analysis provides an interpretation of more information than what prevailed when a particular text was generated. I use textual analysis to establish the details of the women's representation in each film, link the figures back to the research, and explore how they present in a certain way.

#### 1.4 Structure of the thesis

The thesis has five chapters. In the first chapter, the introduction lays out the historical background of the socio-political contexts of China and discusses Confucianism and feminism's influences on Chinese society as an overview. Chapter two covers the existing literature and scholarship on Confucianism, Chinese feminism and Women, feminist theories, and women in films in four different Chinese eras, which are useful to understand the close reading of the films and television programmes. Chapter three discusses the methodological approaches and rationale of the sample selection within the study. Chapter four presents the analysis of findings from the case studies selected across the four eras. Lastly, chapter five presents my conclusion, and discusses the changing trend in the representation of Chinese women, while answering my research questions as set out.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

For generations, Chinese women have existed within the orbit of male-dominated ideologies that have significantly shaped their roles, status, and perceptions. These ideologies have cast a long shadow over societal norms, influencing historical and contemporary dynamics. Films, often regarded as reflections of societal values and narratives, frequently mirror these entrenched norms without subjecting them to critical scrutiny. Female characters, often portrayed through a narrow lens, tend to embody conventional gender roles and expectations. As such, analysing the area of women's representation in film alongside the historical gendered influences present is important. This research intends to provide a deeper understanding of the effects of these ideologies on Chinese women, and how these influences are portrayed within Chinese film. The research will thus begin with an examination into the conventional ideologies of Confucianism, dating from the dynasty eras, through to the contemporary rise of Western feminism in traditional Chinese society. Secondly, I will look at how these changing ideologies and practises over time are reflected in the representation of Chinese women within Chinese films from the Republican, Mao, Post-Mao and Post-2000 eras, with a specific focus on the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present. In addition, I explore the rise of feminism in China, dating from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century conflict and merger with traditional Confucianists, and show how this has impacted women and women's rights in China. In order to do this research, my thesis will follow the historical timeline of modern Chinese history, splitting the findings into four distinct eras, namely, the Republican era (1911-1949), the Mao era (1949-1978), the Post-Mao era (1979-1999), and finally the Post-2000 (2000-present).

#### 2.1 Confucianism on gender and ideology

The Chinese traditions and cultures are heavily informed and influenced by the ideology of Confucianism. Confucianism is an ancient Chinese system of social, ethical, and political philosophy that has been passed down the generations by Confucius since the 6<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Western ethical theories of gender and feminism were not present in the old Chinese community before the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Menke, 2017), and thus, the ethical theory of 'ru', which is also known as Ruism or Confucianism, has been dominant in the Chinese people's mindset for hundreds of years. The 'ru' theory cultivates an ideology of virtuous human relations in the familial and political realms, and as such, may have been a leading cause of the gender disparity and oppression towards the female population over time. The ethical-socio-political teachings promote a pursuit of male-led social and familial harmony. Within Confucianism there are the five foundational virtues of wu chang, and the five relations of Confucianism, which emphasises the lifelong project of self-cultivation and maintaining proper relations. As a result of the male

leadership and control during this period, the values created and sustained a highly patriarchal society, and misogynist phenomenon in China (Roseleen, 2006, p.16). The five virtues of wu chang 五常 are ren 仁 (benevolence), yi 义 (righteousness), li 理 (rites), zhi 智 (wisdom), and xin 信 (trustworthiness), which are encouraged and promoted in Confucianism. These virtues contain a specific set of rules and explanations that outlay the relations of father-son, ruler-minister, old-young, and friends (Roseleen, 2006, p.32). However, the five virtues given for men and women are different. Virtues are also based on the Nei-wai (inner-outer) binary, a moving boundary in Chinese philosophy whereby men must be the centre of importance and outwardly visible in society, while women should be assigned to the home (Roseleen, 2006). Women in this context, must demonstrate their virtues through fidelity and dedication to their family. This is realised through adhering to the directives of the male family members, such as the father, husband, and son, at various stages of life (Gao, 2003). As such, the stereotypical gender roles in Chinese society require women to foster the parental care and devoted responsibilities within the family, and to uphold a harmonious familial and social order based on Confucianism. Women are expected to be obedient, and to fully commit themselves to the men of the family, like the father, husband, and/or sons. This has resulted in women being treated as appendants of these men. These deep-rooted ideologies of gender within this system of virtues originating from Confucius (Li, 2022), have led to the sexist oppressive practices in China.

Confucianism has informed Chinese people's thoughts regarding gender and the gender balance, which has established an ideological difference between both gender, and gender obligations in family and society. As Confucianist theory emphasizes the need for a well-ordered society and harmonious relations, human relationships with family and society have been a crucial factor in their lives. Family is the central institution for individuals under Confucianist theory, and thus it is the core of all social organisation (Scroope & Evason, 2017). Furthermore, Chinese society are considered to be made up of families, not individuals (Su, 1922). They have constructed well-ordered family structures according to the 'generation and ranking' system, which was created to determine family order through long-term practice. In practice, this means that there are three generations living in the same home; grandparents, parents and their children, and is done to indicate family harmony and happiness (Lee, 1949). Within this structure of the family, the oldest members hold more rights than that of the younger members, who must show respect and follow their words. Moreover, in a big family, the men from the same generation have one same name used by all. This is to indicate their generation in the family genealogy, and is usually made up of the first two characters of their given name. Women do not customarily follow this same naming tradition because women are recognized as being a member of their future husband's family (Su, 1922), and thus there is no need for women to be named in the family genealogy going forward.

From the ancient Chinese society, and through into the contemporary period, women are still not considered as independent individuals (Hinsch, 2018). Being a woman denotes an expectation of the social roles and familial relations such as a daughter, a wife, and a mother, and effectively seals her destiny to that of a role which is subservient to men. An example of this higher value given to men is seen in Chinese writing. The characters are logograms in which each character is the symbol of a specific idea (Togawa et al., 2001). The character to present men is 'nan 男', which can be separated into the upper part of 'tian 田' as field and bottom part 'li 力' as power. Thus, the character represents the man as the gender who has strength, and therefore the ability to work in the field. Clearly, the idea is set that 男女有别 (men and women should be treated differently), and the division of obligation and labour between genders are established based on this ideology (Qian & Sayer, 2016). This ideology is deeply rooted within Chinese people's minds, and acts as a metaphor to describe the correlated relationship between men and women as 'Yin-yang' binary. Therefore, the word 'gender' in Chinese languages 'xingbie', is not a kinship-neutral term; it is coextensive with familial and kinship roles to represent the association between a person and the world. Gender as 'xingbie' does not emphasise the natural biological differences but highlights the social and familial differences in roles and obligations of each gender in the community (Farris, 1988), which dominates domestic roles and obligation of women. In the early Confucian literature *Five Classics*<sup>3</sup>, which consists of the *Book of Odes*, *Book of Documents*, *Book of Changes*, *Book of Rites*, and *the Spring and Autumn Annals*, a 'woman' was presented as a role inside the context of familial relations. Women play an idealized life-cycle role within this patriarchal literature, not depicted as individuals within *Five Classics* (Roseleen, 2006).

Furthermore, Confucianism sets the man as the 'yang,' or dominant individual in its philosophy, and a woman, is merely a male-related role (Yun, 2013). The philosophy shows the hierarchical scheme of yin-yang and has been thought to contribute to the idea of how to produce a flourishing of the culture and society. 'Yin-yang 阴阳' is a significant element in Chinese philosophy and cosmology to describe the complementary and interconnected relation between two opposite objects in the natural world (Roseleen, 2006). The earliest appearance of 'Yin-yang' was in the ancient Chinese book *Shangshu (Book of Documents)* where it was used to describe how the sunshine fell differently on the northern and southern sides of a mountain and indicated the correlative relation within a context (Wang, 2012). The 'Yin-yang' binary is used to describe two opposite but complementary ideas or objects. It can expand into a dichotomy of nature or the human world, such as 'dark and light', 'soft and hard', 'cold and warm, but can also be used to symbolise the opposite but complementary relationship between a woman and a man. The difference in the binary of the two opposite objects is qualitative, not conceptually contradictory, for instance, the concept of warm and cold is not an absolute, but rather, they are relatively

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<sup>3</sup> Estimated authorship predates 300BCE.

compared to one other (Roseleen, 2006). Therefore, the ‘Yin-yang’ binary cannot be translated directly or interpreted by the Western dualistic framework of masculinity and femininity. The metaphor can also be interpreted as the feminine, who is passive, is associated with nature, while the masculine, presented as the more active sex, is associated with the patriarchal society (Roseleen, 2006). As such, the Chinese traditional perception of gender and the influence of the ‘Yin-yang’ metaphor deeply solidifies the idea of male superiority, motion, and the firmness of ‘yang’, with its inferior, still, and gentle female counterpart of ‘yin’. This has formed the male figure within Chinese society, superior, in power and in charge of the external affairs of the family. It is the core element that has developed the social order and understanding of gender in the Chinese context. The theory therefore has negatively impacted on issues of gender equality in traditional Chinese cultures, and has formed an unequal social order and patriarchal family patterns.

‘Nei-wai 内外’ as a ritual binary is also a metaphor like that of ‘yin-yang’ but it focuses on the boundary between the family and state, and the private and public, as a functional distinction of gender division of labour and obligations (Rosenlee, 2004). In the region of gender, it emphasises the inner duties as ‘nei’ and outer duties as ‘wai’ of the members in a household. For instance, women in the nei sphere, are socially recognized as the solely kinship-roles of daughter, wife and mother within the domestic realm who were expected not to receive education or any occupation that exceeds the inner state (Roselee, 2004). In the book *Liji (Record of Rites)*, one of the *Five Classics* of Confucian literature books, explains a physical segregation of gender in nei-wai is one approach to avoid contention between gender in a household for promoting well-ordered and civilized Chinese community (Wang, 2003). People have their separate obligations in the family which is defined by a rigid separation line. The nei-wai boundary is a functional distinction within the gender proprieties that has divided the social reality into the familial and nonfamilial realm. For instance, women in Chinese culture under Confucianism are expected to stay within the home under the cultural presumption that ‘men must work outside and women must stay inside the home (男主外, 女主内). By fulfilling their gender role they will be considered the ‘the good wife and wise mother (贤妻良母)’ (Lazer & Sun, 2020). The ‘nei’, which is the realm of domestic nursing and housekeeping for women, and the ‘wai’ that is the domain of knowledge, learning, and culture inheriting for men deprives a woman of her rights to knowledge, and ultimately traps them within nei sphere permanently. Family hierarchal patterns based on the Confucian theory show how gender concepts are rigid. Both genders must follow the rules of representation to maintain a well-ordered society, and hence has increased the position of husbands in the relationship, and also the extended hierarchical relationships faced in the society (Roseleen, 2006).

## 2.2 Socio-political Background in Four Chinese Eras

### 2.2.1 Republican Era (1911-1949)

Women's emancipation was one of the most important doctrines raised by Chinese male intellectuals after the overthrow of the Qing dynasty (Edward, 2000). China formed a provisional government in 1911 through the Chinese revolution (Xinhai revolution), which opposed Confucianist gender hierarchies in a way that had never been seen previously in Chinese history (Menke, 2017). This was a remarkable milestone for Chinese feminism, seeing women permitted to participate in society alongside men and grow into more self-sufficient individuals (Zheng & Zhang, 2010). Several Chinese intellectuals, including Youwei Kang and Qichao Liang, who had previously been exposed to Western ideology identified the differences in their social patterns and the difference in gender equality between Western culture and the Chinese traditional community (Edward, 2000). They blamed the patriarchal social order in China for the country's backwardness and argued that the deep-rooted sexist ideology, and the patriarchal social norms from Confucianism, as the primary causes of China's inferior and underdeveloped international stature in the late nineteenth century (Li, 2000). These thoughts regarding gender had existed for over 2500 years. This new way of thinking created a growing awareness of the essential role that women had in promoting national growth, and the push towards social modernisation marked a significant victory for Chinese feminism. This effectively altered the lives of millions of Chinese women from their previous life of servitude within a stringent patriarchal culture (Chen, 2011). The Republican Era also saw an end to other inhumane sexist practices, such as foot-binding, concubinage, and prostitution, which were all outlawed, and women were given more freedom of expression and personal choice. This did however, upset the traditional familial order (Moeller, 2003). Although, during this period, feminism was widely promoted, and thousands of women were newly present in schools and workplaces, feminism struggled to make rapid progress across all of the Chinese society due to a large number of undereducated, traditional women who were located in rural areas. These women were uninformed of the changes, and ignorant of the new and improved environment for women (Hershatter & Zheng, 2008). Educated women were exceedingly rare in early China, as they had only been that of male property within the family, having little autonomy in fighting for their rights (Moeller, 2003).

Following the *May Fourth Movement* in 1919, the kinship-related term woman funü (妇女 wife-daughter) was replaced with the neutral phrase nüxing (女性 female sex), aligning their status to be an individual, and more like that of the existing term for men of nanxing (男性 male sex). Ma (2020) contends that the word nüxing (女性 female sex) represents the Western model of women who receive education, have free choice of marriage and offspring, and become civilized female citizens. This elevated women's previous inferior position within the Chinese patriarchal society on an ideological level, which changed their status both in the present and in the future. Chinese language is nonneutral, meaning that it reflects the cultural group's values and preferences, which

are accepted and followed by its members. The consequence is that the language contains cultural values that define the group's identity and collective aims (Herr, 2003). Li (2000) states that the feminist movement and the modification of the term for women challenged the traditional Chinese gender stratification, eradicating the solely kinship-related implication of the term 'woman' in Chinese. More significant numbers of women in urban areas of China began participating in the outer sphere and seeking to become independent individuals. The introduction of this Western feminism, however, was critical to China's national movement in the early twentieth century, and fundamentally transformed the male-dominated country's situation through both practise and ideology (Zheng & Zhang, 2010).

Feminism was mostly advocated for by male intellectuals at this time, however, the aims of women's freedom and rights were not accomplished due to the struggle to attain nationalist success. Few female feminists existed because the Confucian expectations for women had placed them in a submissive position to men and other authoritative figures (Menke, 2017). A prominent female feminist, He-Yin Zhen, concentrated on Chinese gender issues while in exile in Japan, but she made few differences to the Chinese society of the period (Zarrow, 1988). Nationalist feminism is the most common in the infant stages throughout Third World countries, as the primary reason for the birth of feminism is to reform and benefit the country (Herr, 2003). China was in the same situation as several other Third World colonised countries, where it was the male intellectuals who introduced and championed feminism on the mainland, and this was seen as a means of achieving nationalism in the underdeveloped region (Edwards, 2000). Women accounted for a substantial percentage of the entire Chinese population, but women's potential power had hitherto been uncovered, and now valued by male intellectuals until the national salvation, the movement against Japanese invaders (Fish, 2019). In reality, feminism in China at the time was more about fostering national rejuvenation than it was about advocating for the women's right to individual fulfilment and gender equality. Pan (1997) points out that women were encouraged to fight alongside men for the nation's rights, freedom, and independence, rather than for their own personal liberties. Furthermore, the feminist movement was premised on the basis that it would bolster the nationalist movement. As Herr (2003) illustrates in his analysis, nationalists, who focus on the external exploitation of gender, often overlook the internal patriarchal oppression of women. As the Nationalists realised the potential women had to provide labour to rebuild and grow the nation, they began exploiting women's labour under the banner of a women's liberation, while neglecting the underlying gender oppression from the patriarchal society. Chinese women's social status improved throughout this era through participating in these more social activities. Still, the gender cognition of the patriarchal society remained unchanged or temporarily abandoned due to national difficulties, particularly during the Second Sino-Japanese war. Nevertheless, feminism's arrival in China in the early twentieth century overturned conventional views and attitudes about 'inferior' women, ended most forms of sexual

oppression, and contributed to raising women's social position for the first time in Chinese history. In the predominantly Confucianist ideological contexts, however, the wave of Western feminism still had a long way to go.

### 2.2.2 Mao era (1949-1979)

Mao Zedong, the founding chairman of the People's Republic of China, advocated that women could do whatever men could in the new era and firmly promoted women's emancipation (Yang & Yan, 2017). Over the following years, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) declared its commitment to women's liberation saying it was a vital concept for the social revolution. This resulted in an extraordinary rise in the social stance of women in education and labour and gave a new rise towards gender equality. Mao, the first leader of Chinese Communist Party and the first chairman of People's Republic of China, contended that women's emancipation before Mao era was due to the feudal bourgeois society, particularly the rooted Confucianist cultural and social customs. As such, eradicating the feudal cultural remnants was necessary for facilitating gender and social equality (Zheng, 2010). However, Mao misinterpreted the concept of equality and sameness in gender relations as deviating from the instinct of femininity (Yang & Yan, 2017), and standardized women's appearance with short hair and male uniforms, while encouraging women to perform like men. The concept of gender sameness led Chinese feminism to the misdirection in the mid-twentieth century.

Feminism in the early Mao era saw women gain working opportunities and economic equality, while still beneath their male counterparts. The women's liberation was a crucial element of Mao's and the Chinese Communist Party's attempts to develop a great socialist society. According to socialist feminism, women's oppression is due to a lack of financial independence (Kennedy, 2008). The theory suggests that women could acquire rights and liberation if their financial situation equalled that of men (Barrett, 2014). Women's social status had been enhanced by engaging in the previously male-dominated labour areas (Leung, 2003). The government's efforts to promote gender reconciliation for the collective, encouraged the women to obtain financial independence. However, the underlying causes of gender discrimination and inequality of the patriarchal society were neither examined nor reformed by Mao and the party. Mao's assumption of the social struggle in social poverty and gender issues was based on the Marxist notion that the dominance of power from various social classes is the fundamental factor that decelerates the pace of social development (Leung, 2003). He defined gender as analogous to the bourgeoisie and proletariat socioeconomic classes, and that it should be eliminated, with little recognition of female self-consciousness of autonomous sexuality (Zheng, 1997). His assertion also deviated from the innate sense of feminism, to provide space for women seeking personal realisation to have the same opportunities as men. Women's liberation did not save women from Confucian

kinship-roles and obligations; instead, it became a means to get women to concentrate on the collective society for benefiting the CCP's domination. In addition, the Maoist social polity imposed multiple obligations on women both inside and outside the household, rejecting women's right to explore their authentic selves, and compelling women to be passive followers. Zheng (2010) adds that only the public roles of women who were contributing to the socialist construction would be highlighted and praised. The CCP's advocacy of women's liberation became a successful propaganda weapon that drove women to relinquish their personhood for the social revolution, rather than fighting for equality and rights for women.

Despite the achievement of increasing the population of financially autonomous women in society, Mao's call for gender equality was mixed up with gender 'sameness', resulting in 'Gender erasure' (Yang & Yan, 2017). Mao and the party attribute gender issues in Chinese community to feudist social patterns from Confucianism, without acknowledging their gender reconstruction was still based on the Yin-yang dualism mentioned previously, that splits genders into two complementary but socially unequal roles. Ultimately, the women were once again relegated to an inferior form of men in the Maoist women's liberation movement, in that they were transformed into a masculine image. Roberts (2019) states that Maoist ideologies define femininity as the features of the weak. Thus, women were required to dress and perform like men to gain gender equality. The CCP viewed women's liberation similarly to class egalitarianism, eliminating unique gender labels, such as femininity, which lead to a fraudulent liberation of women (Zheng, 2010). Moreover, educated young women were forced to wear men's clothes, participate in disciplinary measures against female body ornamentation, and give up self-adornment (Ip, 2003). 'Comrades' replaced the female titles to establish the gender 'sameness' ideology among people (Finlayson, 2018). This effectively drove up the patriarchal privileges within the society. Even though the feminine physical characteristics were discouraged, most women in the Mao era were enthusiastic about their gender-neutral role, especially in the labour market. The Maoist disregard of femininity was a root cause of a continued gender inequality, creating a new form of gender discrimination that had emerged at the political level.

### 2.2.3 Post-Mao Era (1979-1999)

Although Chinese feminist ideologies had seen a shift during the Post-Mao era, their individuality and collective strengths were mostly denied. Scholars such as Li and Zhang (1994, p.146) argue that "Chinese women were mainly passive in the previous process of women's liberation, who habitually grew to expect protection as a given from men, reinforcing the male standard in gender equality within the patriarchal social system". The liberation of women had supposedly been accomplished through the nationalist and socialist revolutions. However, in effect the changing gender politics had reinforced the nation's development and social economy instead of rethinking

and redefining the relations between gender and woman itself (Li, 2000). Even in the Mao era, when the Communist Party pushed for women's liberation it was based on economic reform measures. By promoting women to get an education they could get them to join the public workforce, even though these women were still subservient to the men (Li & Zhang, 1994). Li (2000) contends that Mao's famous political slogan of 'Whatever men can do, women can do also' created a scenario where the people saw women as able to live by the previous male-only standards. The lack of critical women's studies and examination of the gender disparities in China needed addressing in the relatively stable economic and social period. Female issues attracted not only government attention, but also by civil organizations and scholars. Jiang (2000) argues that gender equalities need a certain level of economic development in a country, and the post-Mao era was the time when numerous positive political and economic changes had occurred that promoted the flourishing of feminism in the land.

The *Chinese Women's Federation* was founded and began to examine women and feminism as part of an individual academic discipline. They were committed to helping Chinese women who were facing gender discrimination, especially in the rural areas (Li & Zhang, 1994). As such, the Post-Mao era became a crucial period for Chinese feminism, because this period eradicated national and socio-political concerns, and both the government and civil organizations started a formally and systematic study of women as academic discipline and Chinese gender issue. In addition, the terminology of translating feminism into the Chinese language was also discussed by the Chinese Scholars for Women's Studies in the 1990s, leading to a formal recognition by splitting the word into two terms— feminine-ism (Nü Xing Zhu Yi 女性主义), and women's rights and power-ism (Nü Quan Zhu Yi 女权主义), focussing on two slightly different areas (Min, 2016). Nü Xing Zhu Yi focuses on women and relations with all other subjects which the word 'Nü Xing' means women in Chinese. Nü Quan Zhu Yi accentuates on the rights (Quan 权) of women which emphasizing women's political and social rights (Wang, 2010). These two slightly different terms for feminism were not only based on Western ideologies but also applied within the Confucianist influenced society by working with local Chinese women from a large range of areas and ages. The research by Li and Zhang (1994) illustrates that not only government-sponsored feminist researchers, but also some non-governmental women's studies groups ploughed into the women's gender issues and encouraged women themselves to discover their identities and relations to the family and the society. Unlike the previous feminist movement, that compared women's physical and social status with men, the intellectuals in the post-Mao period rediscovered and restored women's nature, femininity and self-expression by seeing women as active human beings (Zhu & Xiao, 2021). In addition, Zhu and Xiao (2021) discovered that Chinese women writers in this period were largely concerned with women's individual problems in life, like that of the domestic realm, gender consciousness, and self-expression. This was a vast contrast to the female writers in the past decades who tended to focus on the revolution, class

struggles, and the socialist women's liberation. During China's economic boom, society, and in particular women, were able to avoid the ravages of war and social chaos. Feminism sprouted and bloomed since this time on the mainland, and women were transformed from passive objects into active individuals.

The tremendous expansion of self-consciousness and women's rights in the mainland dramatically conflicted with the centralized government's population-controlled planning imperative, which was the one-child policy. The one-child policy was brought into place in 1979 and was intended to limit the rapid population growth in China and alleviate the social and economic problems (Goeking, 2019). This policy constrained the majority ethnic group – Han (汉族), who wanted to have more children to increase their ethnic population. Inadvertently, the government neglected to consider the deep-rooted Confucianist gender ideologies of male importance within the family, which generated unintended complications, not only in gender inequality, but a static gender imbalance (Zhang, 2017). Immediately upon this policy being established, an abnormally high male to female sex ratio emerged (Tang, 2021). This was due to the strong male-over-female mentality, which was largely due to the conventional ideology of continuity of the male lineage, and showed how the Chinese population saw men as both physically and mentally greater than women (Goeking, 2019). In the early stages of the implementation, the government too, placed women as inferior to men, and began to permit some families to have another child if their first child was a girl or a disabled child (Short & Zhai, 1998). In addition, Tang (2021) found that the raised level of male babies was due to a rapid increase in cases of infanticide in the eighties and nineties. Prenatal sex selection also became common practice in many Chinese families to ensure that the only child born to the family would be a boy. This was to ensure the male lineage continued in the family, and to have a relatively strong labour force in the future to come. Furthermore, giving birth to a girl had become a fault of the mother during this time, and the mother would experience family abuse due to her failure to continue the lineage of her husband's side (Hershatter, 2004). Goeking (2019) argued however, that on the positive side the birthing of a girl meant that these girls, who grew up in a one-child family, generally would have a higher academic level, and therefore greater opportunities in their childhood compared with those girls who grew up with siblings. The result was that even though huge progress had been made for Chinese feminism, the deep-rooted gender ideologies and male preference were still hampering the journey of Chinese gender equality.

#### 2.2.4 Post-2000 era (2000-present)

The post-2000 era is marked as a socially, economically, and nationally stable period for the younger Chinese generation. This is because they did not have to experience the chaotic war period and socio-national revolution of the past. The Chinese youth could shift their attention

from the collective community towards individual self and self-rights without the disruption of a turbulent environment (Wang, 2018b). Today, people have more platforms to actively receive diverse information worldwide regarding topics such as gender issues and feminism for example. Feminism, or cyberfeminism, has significantly enhanced the Chinese people's desire to seek information pertaining to topics such as human rights and gender equality, especially for the young generation born after 1990 (Sze, 2003). Individuals from this generation place self-happiness and individual realization in priority (Wang, 2018a). Moreover, this young generation is also the population who were impacted by the one-child policy, and most are an only child of their respective families. Despite 'selfish' and 'egocentric' as words used indicative of this generation, 'anti-traditional' and 'strong self-confidence' are also used to describe them as they have been influenced by the rapid social and technical development within Chinese society over the past the few decades. These influences have maximised the possibility of gender equality for Chinese women (Yi, et al., 2010).

The post-2000 thinking of feminism no longer passively follows governmental advocacy; instead, they have a different personal understanding of feminism and all other social-political ideologies (Liao, 2020). This awakening was largely due to the opening up of the Chinese economy to the rest of the world, together with its global ideologies, and the higher education level of Chinese young women than previously found (Wang, 2018a). Even though the one-child policy was recognized as a disaster for Chinese feminism in the late 20th century, it luckily enhanced Chinese girls' education levels compared with boys and gave these women greater self-awareness and self-confidence. Fong (2002) explains that if a family may only have one child, the child becomes the only 'hope' for the entire family, and thus a high expectation develops, no matter whether the child is male or female, to give them a better education and financial support to ensure the best future for them. Yang (2006) states that young female children in these single-child families generally have a higher education level than children in a multiple-child family because the parents of a single-child are available to put more time, energy, and investment into the only child. Thus, women in this new period have higher educational levels and independency than the previous generations, and are vigorous in reaching equilibriums with men (Wang, 2018a). The path of Chinese feminism in the post-2000 era has transferred from being a passive movement into an initiative for most non-governmental individuals, especially young women who are striving for equal rights and a diminishing of the traditional prejudices and thoughts toward women.

In China's online landscape, there has been a noticeable rise in gender-driven animosity, marked by growing tensions between men and women, which has become a prominent concern on various social media platforms. (Wu & Dong, 2019). For instance, feminists in China's digital era have a radical attitude toward men and gender relations and frequently express feelings of resentment

towards men on social media. 'Feminazi' is a word that first appeared in the late 20th century in the United States. It incorporated the concept of women's rights with murderous political philosophy, and set to resolve gender equality (Hesse, 2021). The word refers to those feminists who tend to be extreme and militant in their attitude toward gender relations. Chinese feminism seems to have fallen into the 'feminazi' trap due to the neglect to educate in the various feminist perspectives. This has led to a large number of young feminists misunderstanding the terminology and tending to use the ideology inappropriately as gender privileges, especially on the internet (Zheng, 2017). Feminism is rarely formally introduced to the young generation by teachers or families, and the young generation habitually learn non-traditional ideologies through self-observation from the internet. This causes a flawed interpretation of feminism. Therefore, the 'Feminazi' is also a big issue found in post-2000 Chinese feminism, particularly cyberfeminism, where some radical and extreme feminist women hold a contemptuous attitude toward men and tend to put gender in juxtaposition (Zheng, 2017). Most Chinese netizens in recent years have literally interpreted 'feminism' as 'women's privilege', which resulted in enduring online arguments between genders and has brought about 'feminism' as a derogatory term (Wu & Dong, 2019).

'Feminist fists' is also a buzzword on Chinese social media, similar to the pejorative English term 'Feminazi', it is used to describe a group of Chinese feminists who hold radical feminist attitudes toward men and see them as the evil enemy of women (Xiao, 2021). Social media has become a powerful platform in the digital era for women to share their experiences of gender-related issues in the workplace and at home (Lindberg, 2021). It is best for Chinese feminism that more women under oppression audaciously speak out to gain social attention to women's rights. Most posts related to feminism and gender issues have generally gained social attention, and in fact, some victims have received social and financial support from the public. The overload of plausible information about feminism has filled up Chinese social media, and men generally became targets for women netizens to vent their anger about the unfair treatment at work and in daily life (Lindberg, 2021). Feminism does not hold a radical stance toward men; instead, "reconciliation between sexes" is the pivotal point for women's liberation and promoting gender equality (Zhu & Xiao, 2021, p. 9). Under the current situation, cyberfeminism in China may have started on the wrong track, where radical cyber-feminists were not satisfied with images of an 'independent woman' and have forced women to be in opposition with men.

### 2.3 The feminist theories of Western and Chinese

Feminist theories approach gender issues critically and in an intersectional manner, aiming to identify and challenge patriarchal structures and practices that negatively impact women (Ferguson, 2017; de Beauvoir, 1953; Mulvey, 1975). As cultural products, film and television

reflect and shape societal beliefs and attitudes about gender, which can be analysed through the lens of feminist theory to explore how the media reinforces or challenges traditional roles, sexuality, and gender norms for women. Laura Mulvey's (1975) book *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* is a seminal work of feminist film theory that examines the relationship between gender and film spectatorship. Simone de Beauvoir's (1953) book *The Second Sex* is another foundational work of feminist theory that examines the social construction of gender and how women have been historically oppressed and marginalized as "others." Both concepts are essential to examine women's representation and social status in films, not just in Western contexts but also in other cultural contexts. Specifically, Chinese feminism, or C-feminism (Wu & Dong, 2019), which has unique Chinese characteristics, is crucial to combine with Western feminist theories to examine better women's representation in Chinese films within the Chinese cultural context. The three theories are fundamental to examining women in Chinese films and television because Chinese women are historically oppressed and marginalized by traditional Confucian concepts.

## 2.4 Feminism and Film

### 2.4.1 *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975)

Laura Mulvey (1975) argues that classical Hollywood cinema is structured around the male gaze, which privileges the male perspective and objectifies women on screen. In her book, she states that the irrational drive determines human behaviour and cognition, and the visual pleasure of cinema is derived from the gendered desire to look, which leads to the idea of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). The early film industry was controlled by men, which structured film within the existing patriarchy of the time. Women signified threat and displayed what was deemed castration anxiety toward men. The male gaze theory links women as objects to be looked at. This is her sole purpose of appearing in the film (Mulvey, 1975). Mulvey (1975) argues that looking is structured around voyeuristic pleasure; a man looks at the woman without her looking back, reinforcing the spectator's ability to objectify the women with their gaze. The opening scene of the Hollywood film *Psycho* (1960) is a classic example of the male gaze in action, as the camera follows the young female character while she undresses and gets into the shower. The camera lingers on her body during the washing, exposing her body with close-ups and slow motion, creating a sense of voyeurism and an object of desire for the viewer.

Moreover, Mulvey (1975) states the narratives usually follow the template of the male hero as the controlling figure who saves the world and rescues the woman. "The presence of women is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 19). Mulvey (1975) discusses the tendency of female characters

in the film to be punished or marginalized for not conforming to patriarchal norms and expectations, arguing that this reflects broader societal attitudes towards women and reinforces traditional gender roles and power dynamics. The Chinese films *The Goddess* (1934) and *New Women* (1935) are examples of this phenomenon, and will be discussed in the findings, where female characters face punishment or marginalization for transgressing societal norms. These films reflect more significant societal attitudes towards women and reinforce traditional gender roles and power structures within Chinese culture.

#### 2.4.2 *The Second Sex* (1953)

Simone de Beauvoir's (1953) book, *The Second Sex*, puts forth the idea that women have historically been defined and categorized in relation to men rather than as individuals, resulting in the "othering" of women. The concept has been used to justify women's subordination to men and their control and objectification by the patriarchal society. The book's ideas on the role of culture in shaping societal attitudes towards gender can be connected to Confucianism, as both acknowledge how these attitudes can lead to the marginalization and oppression of women. However, they differ in their approach to addressing these issues. Confucianism emphasizes hierarchical social relationships and traditional gender roles, where women are expected to be submissive and obedient to men, while *The Second Sex* (1953) challenges these roles and argues for women's equality in all aspects of life.

Women being defined and categorized in relation to men as "the other," as discussed by de Beauvoir's is evident in Chinese films where they are often portrayed as submissive and subordinate. The marginalization and subordination of women in Chinese society are frequently depicted in movies. For instance, *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) shows the protagonist, Songlian, being forced to become the fourth wife of a wealthy man and subjected to a life of isolation and oppression. Films with similar genders in China reflect societal attitudes towards women in Chinese culture, where they are historically treated as "the other" in relation to men, and their agency and rights are often overlooked.

#### 2.4.3 Chinese Feminism / C- feminism

C-feminism is used to highlight the complexity of feminism in the Chinese context, and the adoption of the term "C-fem" acknowledges that feminism in China may not always adhere to Western feminist theories (Wu & Dong 2019). According to Wu and Dong (2019), Chinese feminism has developed within a unique context shaped by Confucianism, socialism, and post-socialist marketization. It has needed to navigate these distinct cultural and political contexts and has influenced people's understanding of gender, family, and society. Therefore, Chinese feminism has developed in ways that differ from Western feminist theories, but this does not mean

it is less legitimate or valuable. Rather, it reflects the diversity and complexity of feminist struggles and experiences across different regions and cultures.

According to Wu and Dong (2019), there are two distinct strands of C-feminism that differ from Western feminist theories. The "Entrepreneurial" strand and the "non-cooperative" strand. The "Entrepreneurial" strand encourages women to reject traditional gender roles and prioritize their autonomy to maximize personal benefits, while the "non-cooperative" strand focuses on empowering women who possess excellent education and economic resources and reject being constrained to passive roles as mere appendages to men (Wu & Dong 2019).

## 2.5 Influence of Feminism in Chinese History

As Hooks (2000) suggests feminism does not posit men in opposition to women, but rather that it is a movement to stop gender exploitation and oppression. Feminist theory enables researchers to discover and identify how women engage in a particular society and interact with it, especially for the aspects such as patriarchy, oppression, and inequality (Ferguson, 2017; Collins, 2019). Chinese feminism shares commonalities with Western feminism, however, there are differences due to the distinct cultural, political, and historical backgrounds. According to Meng (2018), Chinese women emphasize traditions with a strong collective consciousness. For instance, they frequently emphasise the general status of women regarding social status while indirectly pursuing their equality and independence in the process of achieving their own value. The individuals in the society are more likely to conform to the desired behaviours of the Confucian values and beliefs and then behave in socially expected roles and positions in the society (Tang et al., 2010). Like most other Eastern nations, maintaining harmonious social and familial relationships is essential to one's ability to connect with others in Chinese society (Han, 2008). Based on the collective cultural background, Chinese women are more likely to follow and obey the socially desired behaviour to maintain social order. Consequently, the needs and goals of the community take priority over those of the individual. Chinese people typically lack self-assertiveness, feel obligated to perform collective duties and tasks, and devalue their own freedom to benefit the collective group because they adopt a collective mindset (Hui, 1988). The gender relationship in Chinese culture and history is one of a complementary working unit, where men and women are dependent on each other for advancing social history. Thus, these gender divisions of obligation and labour become crucial in evaluating women's social status and relations with men. Spakowski (2011) states that Chinese feminism shifted the focus of 'gender' itself in Western feminism to the gender roles and obligations in the Chinese society.

## 2.6 Women in Western and Chinese Cinema

In early Hollywood films, women have often portrayed in domestic roles focused on motherhood, romance, and family, with a passive role under patriarchy (Doane, 1987; Balio, 1995). However, during the Golden Age of Hollywood cinema from the late 1920s to the 1960s, a new female figure emerged in the form of the *Femme Fatale*, a seductively beautiful woman who challenged the traditional image of domesticity, particularly in the Film noir genre (Hanson & O'Rawe, 2010). The *Femme Fatale* is a character who uses her beauty to seduce male characters and pursue her ambitions and desires (Grossman, 2009). For example, in the film *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) by John Huston, the female protagonist Brigid is a beautiful and mysterious woman who uses her charm and sexuality to manipulate Spade and other male characters for her purpose. The film noir genre reflects the societal changes during and after World War II. In classic films, the *femme fatale* character represents the changing perspective on sexuality, influenced by the massive influx of women entering the workforce during the war (Boozer, 1999). The male heroes in film noir can only end encounters with threats, betrayal, and decadence through death, reflecting a sense of despair and disillusionment in the aftermath of the war. This pessimistic response to the post-war downturn of society and economics is a hallmark of the genre (Bronfen, 2004).

In contrast, women in early twentieth-century Chinese films served as visual and discursive symbols that reflected the nation's reformation process (Cui, 2003). The highly unbalanced gender dynamic in China, which had traditionally oppressed and marginalized women, began to shift in the early twentieth century following the end of the Chinese empire that had lasted for over two thousand years (Duara, 1998). As a result, the rise of feminism and the increase in women's participation in society became key factors in the nation's reform process, and this was reflected in the representation of women in early twentieth-century Chinese films (Wang, 2011). The portrayal of traditionally oppressed and passive women in the films thus became an image that reflected the progress of the new nation and society and also the ambivalence of women's representation.

The Golden Age of Chinese cinema emerged during the leftist movement in the 1930s, driven by a transformation of cultural values in response to the national crisis (Hong, 2009; Zhou, 2016). The portrayal of the 'New Woman' or 'Modern Woman' figures in media, characterized by their education, political awareness, and financial independence, served as a metaphor for the developing nation of China, which was on a quest for civilization, progress, and development, and which stood in contrast to the traditional Chinese woman's image of staying within the household (Edwards, 2000; Stevens, 2003). For instance, in the film *New Woman* (1935), the female protagonist, Wei Ming, desires to be a writer and support herself independently as a teacher in Shanghai. As women entered the society in increasing numbers, the New Woman's image reflected the dramatic social changes brought about by promoting Western feminist ideologies of gender during the nation formation (Guo, 2013). At the same time, the films also

highlighted the challenges women faced in resisting patriarchal societal norms, with motherhood being a key element of female identity (Chu, 2022). As Qin (2018) argues, Chinese films frequently portray women as good wives and caring mothers who sacrifice their bodies if circumstances require them. The 'New women' image challenged the figure of good wives but maintained the emphasis on women's motherhood.

The 'New Woman' image was replaced by the figures of women warriors and gender-neutral women in Chinese films of the Mao era (1949-1976), which were used as tools for mobilizing the masses to better cooperate with the government's policies (Guo, 2021). For instance, *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961) portrays an innocent female protagonist who joins the Red Detachment of the Chinese Communist Party. Women in Mao era films were often featured as female communist warriors and heroines with spiritual enlightenment in the class struggle against capitalist enemies and foreign invaders, who voluntarily self-sacrificed to defend their revolutionary organizations and the Chinese Communist Party (Chen, 2003). Weakland (1971) observes that the heroines in Maoist films were emphasized for their transformation from helplessly oppressed women to honorary members of the Chinese Communist Party. They are depicted as having determination and endurance through the representation of their communist revolution, which creates a model of a communist heroine.

Although the brave heroine figures challenged the traditional image of Chinese women, the consistent portrayal of women in Maoist films served as a propagandistic tool to build a masculine woman for achieving Maoist women's liberation during the Cultural Revolution (Li, 2020). The Maoist films prioritized the collective goals of the government, forsaking women's personal needs to portray proletarian awareness (Yang & Yan, 2017). For example, the female protagonist Qionghua in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961) is educated by a Chinese male communist to prioritize the party's collective goal above all her desires.

During a period comparable to China's Mao era, the United States underwent a trend of sexploitation films spanning from the 1960s to the early 1970s. These films were rapidly produced and frequently showcased female nudity, suburban vices, and urban depravity (Gorfinkel, 2017). The surge in sexploitation can be credited to the social and cultural movement of the sexual revolution, which transformed moral perspectives in the United States and brought sexuality into mainstream conversation and media, including films (Cutright, 1972). However, films such as *Beach Blanket Bingo* (1965), and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970) employed sexual freedom as a pretext to further objectify women by emphasizing their sexual characteristics. Drawing on Mulvey's (1975) book, women signify the threat of men's castration anxiety, such as power loss; therefore, the idea of the male gaze comes in and objectifies women by hegemonic patriarchy since early cinema. Another key theory that demonstrates another way of examining female roles

was the term Final Girl which was coined by Carol Clover in her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (1992) that refers to the last girl standing at the end of a horror movie. The final girl is a virgin and virtuous and their existence is a reflection of how society consumes horror and violence. Therefore, both Western and Eastern countries have different ways of examining gender.

Chinese film productions were negatively influenced by the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976, as propaganda films featuring uniformed female communist warrior figures flooded all film productions (Chen, 2008). However, in the Post-Mao era, more female directors emerged who spread concerns about women's issues, such as sexual relationships, female independence, and feminine emotion in their works (Hu, 2017). The diversity of women's images appeared in films after the Mao era, and the interaction between genders was no longer limited to comradeship. The sexual reawakening, as a sign of social progress and reformation with the economic boom in the post-Mao era, reinvented Chinese youths' perception and attitude toward gender and sexuality, leading to unprecedented attention on gender issues in Chinese films (Zhou, 2001). For example, the film *Women Demon Human* (1987) by female director Shuqing Huang depicts a woman going against traditional roles and seeking self-fulfilment by playing male roles in Chinese opera. Women's images no longer seem passive to the party or men; they are aware of their personal life and the world. Without the strict regulation of film production in the previous genderless decades, women were depicted as images with feminine beauty and female rebels against the Confucian and Maoist gender ideologies; female characters were exposed to personal desire and liberation in films (Zhang, 1990).

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on the representation of women in Hollywood films, with increasing attention directed towards the issues of gender equality and diversity (Kunsey, 2019). This trend reflects the increasing influence of movements advocating for better representation and inclusivity in the film industry. Notable films featuring strong, powerful, and diverse female characters include *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003) and *Wonder Woman* (2017), which have contributed to the push for greater diversity in women's representation in film. In China, the social status of women has significantly increased in the post-2000 era, owing to socio-political reforms and globalization. As a result, women have become a significant audience and consumer of films and television. The growth of the Chinese film market has led to the increasing commercialization of Chinese cinema, with political ideologies being reasserted into films (Hu & Chen, 2021). Mo (2021) suggests that the film industry market has been a decisive factor in shaping the portrayal of women in Chinese films, with independent female characters gaining prominence in response to market demand for greater gender equality. For example, films such as *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019) and *Hi, Mom* (2021) have shifted the focus to female-dominant narratives, highlighting contemporary women's issues. Despite these changes, women's representation in films still has a long way to go towards achieving greater equality and inclusivity.

This research therefore examines Chinese women's representation over key time periods examining the way that women's roles have changed. In the next chapter I outline the methodology and approach that I use to explore the changing representation of women in each time period.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter has outlined the research pertaining to how the influences of Confucianism, political leadership, and the rise of feminism has affected women in China across the Republican, Mao, Post-Mao, and Post-2000 eras. In addition, the chapter has assessed the association of these chronological changes in Chinese feminism alongside the representation of Chinese female figures in Chinese film and television. This chapter presents the rationale for my study and maps the research approach, theme selection and sample selection of the eight film and television programmes from four different eras in this study will be presented. Limitations found in the research process in the study will be presented and discussed at the end of this chapter.

#### 3.2 Research Question

As a Chinese woman studying media and communication in a Westernised country, I have found that although conventional Chinese ideologies of gender, gender-related issues, and feminism differ in many ways from that of a Western viewpoint, China has seen some of these Westernised influences filter into their culture. For example, women were previously restricted from entering the public sphere and were expected to become housewives after marriage in traditional Chinese society. Nowadays, Chinese women are also advocating for equal gender pay and reproductive rights, and as feminism gradually gains momentum in China, more young Chinese women are opposing social inequalities and actively fighting against sexual harassment, influenced by the Western feminist movement # MeToo (Lin & Yang, 2019). More female-oriented films and television programmes have emerged into the Chinese film and television market since early 2010s which is gradually impacting upon public perceptions of gender. I was curious about how Chinese women have become more active and autonomous in the historically patriarchal Chinese society, and how the changes impact women's representation in Chinese film and television. Therefore, two research questions raised, which are:

1. How are the Chinese women portrayed in the Chinese films or television of the eras?
2. How do these female figures support or oppose Confucianism and feminism over each era of the Republican, Mao, Post-Mao, and Post-2000?

Based on the research question, I would like to establish if 'Confucianism' and 'feminism' are two significant ideologies that have influenced Chinese people's ideas toward gender and gender relations. Hence, I concentrate my research on these two terminologies, their associations with

people's cognition and behaviour historically, and how they impact Chinese women, gender relations, and women's social status in films and society in four different eras.

### 3.3 Qualitative Approach

This research primarily uses a qualitative approach. Ritchie (2003) states that focused descriptive data in qualitative research is more suitable than numerical statistics in the quantitative approach of investigating social sciences such as gender issues. It is also commonly used in media and cultural studies to generate and identify themes and patterns (Davies & Mosdell, 2006). This research adopts a qualitative approach to discover the patterns and changes in Chinese women's representation, social status, and gender relations in Chinese film and television over time. Qualitative research involves collecting non-numerical data, such as text and video (Punch, 1998), detailed observation of the data (Thomas, 2006), and ultimately generating in-depth knowledge and novel ideas to deliver a rich interpretation of a focusing question (Elo & Kynga, 2008). In this research, my central research question is focused on the portrayal of Chinese women in the four-time eras: Republican, Mao, Post-Mao, and Post-2000. In addition, the investigation of the changing trend of gender relations is reflected in film and television over the four eras involved. Corbin and Strauss (2008) point out that qualitative research provides a comprehensive exploration of the insight of different situations. 'The women's social status in Chinese society' and 'the representation of women figures in Chinese film and television' are the investigated phenomenon in the study based on the influences of Confucianism and feminism in Chinese female-oriented film and television, and also society.

Inductive reasoning in qualitative research allows researchers to explore themes and patterns from a hypothesis through observation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Streefkerk, 2019), which produces a more profound understanding through close reading and analysis (Bellamy, 2011). The inductive process has been used in the insights of the selected eight film and television programmes to discover and generate the patterns of change in women's representation in the film and television, and to finally analyse and conclude (Thomas, 2006). Inductive reasoning in this study offers the analysis and interpretation of how female images were depicted and how they have been changed in the Republican, Mao, Post-Mao, and Post-2000 eras through the selected examples. Thereby, feminism and its underlying gender relations can be parsed through a qualitative approach (Gergen & Gergen, 2007) to acquire the socio-cultural messages associated with gender inequality and portrayals of women figures in the selected films and television (Ritchie, 2003).

### 3.4 Method

Textual analysis involves the investigation of words, images, and motifs in the texts, such as videos and social media contents, which are often used in the study area of culture and media

(Frey et al., 1999). The method is a ‘toolkit’ for studying media contents (Bainbridge, 2011, p. 224), which allows researchers to gain information through a comprehensive observation and examination and then explain the patterns from various media texts (Mckee, 2003). Fairclough (2003) states that researchers can catch the implicit meaning of the cultural information and ideologies with textual analysis and develop a comprehensive understanding of the sociocultural problems through analysing. It is a powerful method for close readings through decoding and interpreting the implicit and explicit sign within the media texts (Bainbridge, 2011). Thus, this method will be suitable for my analysis.

Feminist theory will be the fundamental theoretical approach taken in this study which focuses on gender inequality, including discrimination, patriarchy, and oppression (Gilligan, 1977). An analysis of the social status and experiences of different gender roles in media studies (Chodorow, 1989) will also be made. The regional and cultural differences between the West and China is examined with the ‘Made-in China’ feminist approach/ C-feminist approach (Wu & Dong, 2019). This will highlight the significant ‘entrepreneurial’ strand and ‘non-cooperative’ strand, which is the base theory used for analysing women and women in Chinese society. The ‘entrepreneurial’ strand relates to women’s autonomy and independence in a society that discards Chinese traditional women’s kin-ship duties, as self-sacrifice and submissive wife and mother (Wu & Dong, 2019). The ‘Non-cooperative’ strand looks at women’s active self-awareness, including their self-thinking ability within their personal life, without blindly following the traditions and patriarchal rules (Wu & Dong, 2019). Chinese feminism was developed from Western based concepts of gender equality (Liu, 2016), but it includes Chinese ideologies that have been based on traditional Confucianism and the Communist Party’s political constraints (Zhu & Xiao, 2021). The deep-rooted Confucian gender ideas emphasise the roles and obligations between genders. ‘Men and women should be differentiated’ and ‘Ying-yang’ binary constitutes Chinese people’s recognition of gender and gender relations which lead to gender stereotypes, oppression and discrimination against women. In this study, the primary method of the Chinese feminist approach (C-feminist approach) will be combined with Chinese historical ideology to firstly examine the problems pertaining to gender inequality, then to discover the optimal change toward Chinese feminism through analysis of the media texts, and finally, to support the voice and empowerment of Chinese women in the journey of advocating gender equality.

### 3.5 Sample

I have selected eight film and television texts to serve as my case studies in this thesis. My rationale here is to have two texts per era being examined. The details of these texts are presented in the table below.

Film	Year Released	Era	Awards
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<i>The Goddess</i>	1934	Republican	Hong Kong film Awards (2005): One of China's top 100 films
<i>New Women</i>	1935	Republican	One of Lingyu Ruan's (the female protagonist) better Known works
<i>Song of Youth</i>	1959	Mao Era	Included in the list of outstanding films for Centenary of the Communist Party of China (2021)
<i>The Red Detachment of Women</i>	1961	Mao Era	Hundred Flowers Awards (1961): China's best script & best director
<i>Hibiscus Town</i>	1986	Post-Mao Era	Golden Rooster Awards(1987): Best Film Hundred Flowers Awards(1987): Best Film
<i>Woman Demon Human</i>	1987	Post-Mao Era	The 1 <sup>st</sup> Feminist Chinese film by critics and scholars the 8th Golden Rooster Awards (1988): The Best Writing
<i>Send Me to the Cloud</i>	2019	Post-2000 Era	32 <sup>nd</sup> Golden Rooster Awards: Best Supporting Actress Award for Wu Yufang & four nominations
<i>Nothing but Thirty</i> (Television Series)	2020	Post-2000 Era	27 <sup>th</sup> Shanghai Television Festival: International Communication Award

Table 1. Data Samples

The rationale for including film and television is because in China, television has become the most influential and popular form of media and is now recognised as “The New Family Mediator” between people and the society (Bai & Song, 2014, p. 1). The social issues found in television dramas in China have frequently become trending topics that have sparked public debates on social media. This is largely due to the government policy of overseeing and regulating the Chinese film industry. As a result, productions tend to avoid sensitive themes, such as socio-political and gender issues, in order for the work to be approved for viewership. As such, the range of Chinese films has decreased (Priest, 2015). My selection of case studies shows a good range over time to assess and reflect Chinese gender issues. Moreover, these examples are all from within the regional range of Mainland China to keep the focus placed on the impacts of the socio-political movement on women in Mainland China.

The first important criteria that I made for my sample selection was that the texts must be well-known to contemporary Chinese audiences. They also needed to have achieved formal awards. In view of this I selected *The Goddess* (1934), which is considered the filmic masterpiece of ‘the

first golden age of Chinese cinema' (Hansen, 2000), and *New Women* (1935) which features the same female protagonist Lingyu Ruan, and it is one of the best-known examples of acting by a female protagonist (Chow, 2017). *Song of Youth* (1959) is included as an outstanding film made for the Centenary of the Communist Party of China in 2021 (Yang, 2021). *The Red Detachment of Women* (1960) won the China's best script and best director in the 1961 *Hundred Flowers Award* (Chinese Film Association [CFA], n.d.). *Hibiscus Town* (1986) won the prize for best film in both the *Hundred Flowers Awards* and *Golden Rooster Award* of 1987 (Chinese Film Association [CFA], n.d.). *Women Demon Human* (1987) was selected because it was produced by the first Chinese feminist female filmmaker, Shuqin Huang (Kang, 2015). *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019) won the Best Supporting Actress Award for Wu Yufang and four nominations in the 32<sup>nd</sup> *Golden Rooster Awards* (Chinese Film Association [CFA], n.d.), and the last sample, is the television series, *Nothing but Thirty* (2020) that won the International Communication Award and was nominated the Best Television Series in the 27<sup>th</sup> *Shanghai Television Festival* (Shanghai Television Festival [STVF], 2021).

The second criterion for the selection of my texts was the examples needed to centre female protagonists in the films as they could reflect the socio-political situation of women in these times. All of the selected films and televisions fit my parameters based on their wonderful female-centred storytelling and visual representation and reflect the phenomenon of the era. *The Goddess* (1934) tells a single young mother's life struggles as a prostitute who faces gender oppression during the Republican era. *New Women* (1935) also tells the story of how an independent new woman in the Republican era seeks autonomy and self-achievement in the modern city of Shanghai. The two films *Song of Youth* (1959) and *The Red Detachment of Women* (1960) of the Mao era, both tell the story of powerful and fearless women who join the Chinese Communist Party, and how they fight for revolution and national flourishing. *Hibiscus Town* (1986) tells the story about a female entrepreneur of a bean-curd soup restaurant who experiences political persecution during the Cultural Revolution but never gives up during her times of tribulation. *Women Demon Human* (1987) also tells the story about a determined and active woman, who experiences oppression from family and society, and finally becomes the master of a Chinese opera performance of male roles—Zhongkui. The examples of the Post-2000 era are *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019) and the television series *Nothing but Thirty* (2020). These are centred around the new generation of Chinese women who are independent and active seeking personal value and self-fulfilment while consistently advocating women's liberation and feminism.

Ruane (2016) states that determining an appropriate sample size is challenging because a bigger sample size impedes the examination of a particular phenomenon; however, a small sample size should be evaluated for accurately developing the pattern and phenomenon. Formal 'feminist films' or 'feminist television' in mainland China is rare, due to the political regulation on the film

and television industry. The feminist film *Woman Demon Human* (1987) is an example offered in this area. Films that focus on women-centred narratives and female protagonists, however, are produced by Chinese filmmakers and widely recognized by the Chinese audience. The selection of two female-centred examples for each era was made because they are the most representative works that show specific characteristics of the women's image, and are telling their stories of being a woman in four eras of Chinese history. In addition, these case studies will demonstrate the conflicts and emergence of feminism in China, and the social reaction and treatment of those women and feminist ideologies.

### 3.6 Data Collection Method

My research started with watching each film in chronological order. The first viewing of the texts let me re-familiarise myself with the storytelling details and the women's representation in the films of each era. Since Confucianism and feminism are the two critical terminologies in this research, the close observation of the samples focused on the image and behaviours of the main women characters and their relations with others and society. Women in films and television across different eras are visually and narratively represented in varying ways, including their roles in the films, their relationship with society, and the mindsets of women.

After collecting and close reading all the literature on Chinese women from the four different eras in my literature review, women's images and characteristics from each era will be observed and discovered through their associated representation within these case studies. After discovering and identifying these themes and characteristics of female representation from each era, I undertook multiple re-watching's of the films and identified the emerging themes from each text. I then examined these themes in terms of the historical period that they were produced to see if I could map them as a reflection of women's societal roles during the individual eras, using Confucianism and feminist theory. The findings of the research can be utilised for an analysis and interpretation to define how the women's images are shown and represented.

Era	Characteristics
<p>Republican Era (1912-1949)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transformation from 'Traditional women' to 'Modern women'</li> <li>• Persuade personal independent in society but still under patriarchal society</li> <li>• 'Selfless Mother' that women were inseparable associated with the children and the familial roles and obligation of women still emphasized</li> </ul>
<p>Mao Era (1949-1969)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Masculinity women' and 'Women Warrior', gender differences were ignored, and women were encouraged to show their masculinity as an evidence of gender equality</li> <li>• Women became relatively equal than men in workplace but still lack of female consciousness and personal desire</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women were passive to the psychological father— Chinese Communist Party</li> </ul>
Post- Mao Era (1970-1999)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women’s self-consciousness has been awakened due to the shift of attention toward formal women’s study</li> <li>• Women were both mentally and physically independent who seek personal achievement and value</li> <li>• ‘Resistant women’ and ‘determinate women’ presents under the socio-political oppression</li> </ul>
Post-2000 Era (2000-Present)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The new generation of Chinese women are active, independent who are seeking for personal achievement and fulfilment</li> <li>• Bravely and actively against gender oppression</li> <li>• Powerful women figure who dominant in inner and outer sphere</li> </ul>

Table 2. Characteristics of Women from Four eras

The depiction of women in the public sphere and within the domestic of inner sphere are also crucial to this analysis which maps the changing representation of gender through time. Gender relations in China have changed due to the influence of Confucianism and feminism. I have noticed that the representation of female figures from the early twentieth century films are relatively lower, representing a strong 'patriarchal social pattern' that women’s working, and familial life were under male authority. The unbalanced gender relations are not only discovered in the spousal relationship in the films but also in the women's relationships with men and others in society. In addition, the idea of the romantic relationship was rarely shown in the Republican and Mao eras but was in Post-Mao and Post- 2000 eras. I will show that the unbalanced gender relations are not only due to aggressive male figures, and that women in the early two eras were passive and followed men's rules. The phenomenon stands for the Confucianist gender ideology of 'Yin-yang' where women are weaker compared to the men.

### 3.7 Limitation

The most significant limitation of this study is the regional differences in feminism in rural and urban Chinese areas. China is one of the world's biggest countries, leading to financial and cultural differences in different Chinese cities. The rural areas in China are less likely to be influenced by Western and novel ideologies than urban cities, especially in the early 20th Century. Even in the present, the mindsets of Chinese women in the rural areas are still relatively traditional compared to that of the people in the cities. Therefore, to generalise this analysis for all women in China may be misleading. However, the analysis seeks to demonstrate the changes in female representation over important time periods. The scholarly literature mainly focuses on the general circumstance of the Chinese without comparing the differences between rural and urban premises. Moreover, conventional Chinese filmmakers tend to centre their protagonist in a rural background

to create and highlight the mental conflicts of the rural character moving into a modernized environment. Therefore, the media texts reflect the general phenomenon of the curtain timeframe but lack specifications in different places of China.

Another limitation relates to the literature data selection: the research is based on English literature with a Chinese language-based topic. The texts selected through qualitative research are subjective (Sarantakos, 2012), especially regarding socio-poetical events and human rights. Researchers in Chinese and Western backgrounds constantly have different evaluations surrounding major Chinese socio-political events due to the different educational patterns and political integrity within the two distinct societies. The English language-based studies of the topic could also lead to the literature reviews that tend to propose Western perspectives of Chinese feminism. However, the literature from both Western and Chinese researchers has been chosen to maximize the neutrality and validity in analysing Chinese feminism in historical events and fill the gap between Western and Chinese perspectives.

## Chapter 4

### Findings and Discussion

#### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I analyse female representations within my chosen samples, and the social status of female protagonists in the seven films—*The Goddess* (1934), *New Women* (1935), *Song of Youth* (1959), *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961), *Hibiscus Town* (1986), and *Woman Demon Human* (1987); *Send Me to the Cloud* (2019); and the television drama —*Nothing but Thirty* (2020) which is analysed separately. The selected samples in the study of post- 2000 includes a television drama due to the fast development of the television market in the era. Film is no longer the sole platform that visually reflected the social norms and values. Television dramas reach a broader audience and more frequently spark conflicts and arguments over gender relations in post-2000 China. Paired samples were selected from four significant eras of the Republican era, the Mao era, Post-Mao, and Post-2000. This chapter sets out an analyse and explore the change in gender relations through the four periods. The analysis of female representations and gender relations is based on the theories of Confucianism and feminism and compares the changing face of female representations and gender relations in China. The data comprises an examination of film and television, which provides a broad structure of the analysis chapter. A brief conclusion of the findings is provided at the end of this chapter.

#### 4.2 Republican Era

The Chinese films during the Republican Era were influenced by leftist political efforts and the films reflect the socio-political issues in Chinese society (Berry, 1989). The issues observed mainly relate to people at the lower-class level of the society, who receive poor treatment due to their gender, occupation and familial background. Leftist films seek for modernity through the depiction of social issues which reflect the cultural and political conflicts in the nation (Zhou, 2016). As women's liberation, promoted by Western-influenced Chinese intellectuals in the early twentieth of China progressed, gender issues became the one of the main areas of interest in leftist movies. *The Goddess* (1934) is based in the period when Western feminism first entered China and represents woman's suffering in the double life of mother and protagonist as it responds to the movement of the 'New Women' at that time. *New Women* (1935) is another leftist film, which influences the promotion of modern/new women's images and portrays three different types of women in the 1930s while questioning the 'standards' for the 'New Women' image. Both films reflect the optimal changes of Chinese women in the Republican era who were no longer solely portrayed in the domestic as passive objects following the Confucian ideology and interdependent on the male relations for survival. Female figures widely appeared in the public, such as schools

and workplaces, showing their autonomy and independence. However, the tragedy of the main female protagonists from both films is that they showcase the unchangeable inferior female status and gender oppression from the patriarchal society in the Republican era. Even though the transformation of women had occurred, women still did not have the same opportunities as men and society was still unequal in its treatment of gender issues.

#### 4.2.1 *The Goddess* (1934) Narrative

The female protagonist in the film is not given a name; she is around 25 years old and often dressed in a tight qipao. Qipao is a traditional Chinese dress marked by its high collar, close-fitting bodice, and slit skirt, which gained popularity in the 1920s and 1930s and has since become an iconic symbol of Chinese fashion. She works as a street vendor to help support her son's upbringing and education. We witness her working every night without complaining, despite the challenges of raising a little boy by herself in a modern city. This unnamed woman hides at a gangster's home one night out of fear, but instead of receiving security from the threat, the gangster compels her to engage in sexual activities with him. The gangster visits her house frequently after that night for sexual favours and coerces her into marrying him. The neighbours start to gossip about her, naming her a prostitute, and forbid their children from playing with her son. They go on to use foul language to abuse the young child. She cannot stand how her son is treated poorly by the neighbours and decides to use her meagre savings to send him to a school.

The mother's neighbour spreads rumours about her being a prostitute after she attends the boy's school poetry reading. This results in numerous parents writing reproachful letters to the principal. They demand the expulsion of the boy from the school due to his "disreputable" background. However, the principal does not act on these allegations, having personally observed the child's behaviour at school. The parents claim that a student with a prostitute mother will corrupt their innocent children, and his presence in an educational environment is dishonourable. The mother is distraught, and feels like she is in a hopeless situation as nobody cares about her son's life, only his background. The school principal, however, shows sympathy for the mother and her son after evaluating his educational attainment and investigating his family background. Even after these investigations have taken place, the school committee refuses to let the boy attend school, resulting in the principal putting in a voluntarily resignation. Meanwhile, the gangster steals the protagonist's savings hidden in her room, and in a quarrel, she accidentally kills him and is then sent to jail. Fortunately, the principal takes her son in and promises to raise him.

#### 4.2.2 Women's representation in *The Goddess* (1934)

The ambiguous double life of the ideal mother and immoral prostitute is juxtaposed in the representation of the unnamed female protagonist in *The Goddess* (1934). The concept of living

the 'Three Feminine Obedience and Four Feminine Virtues' of Confucianism, which has set the moral rules for women in China to obey the male members in the family, and be moral to the speech and behaviour, has forced women to devotedly serve their husbands and children in order to maintain a well-ordered patriarchal society pattern. The conventional ideology of "follow the son after the husband's death" (夫死从子) represented in the film reflects the Confucian values toward women in the role of the mother through the portrayal of the goddess in the film. The portrayal of the prostitute mother reveals the underlying gender oppression through her hopelessness, whereby she can only offer her sexuality by becoming a sex object as a way to earn money. The double life of a divine mother in the daytime and a depraved prostitute at night makes a strong comparison in the film that represent the tragic fate of ordinary women in the Republican era.

*The Goddess* (1934) creates the image of an ideal, selfless mother who prioritizes the child and gives everything of herself to raise the child. The foundational principles for evaluating a woman's behaviour, ambitions, and her position in relation to men were rooted in the traditional Confucian gender ideals of being a virtuous wife and good mother. (Leung, 2003). Given that the philosophy strongly emphasizes a woman's duty to obey her husband, father, and sons in a submissive manner, many conventional Chinese women consider their children to be the centre of their lives, which is also represented in the film. An example can be seen at the end of the film, when this woman only has her son's future in mind. She is imprisoned, but is seen wailing in the jail, "Where is my child? Let me out", before the school's principal arrives. Her expression turns from melancholy to that of calm as the principal promises to adopt her son and provide for his education. After the principal has left, she smiles, and a vision of her child appears. The self-fulfilment of this unnamed



*Figure 1.* The Imprisoned Mother Missing Her Son

woman in the film follows the traditional Confucianist way—dedicating self to the family—in contrast to numerous Western Hollywood melodramas who attain self-fulfilment through remarriage or personal success. She highlights her selflessness and devotion to the child like the traditional desired mother figure in Chinese culture; but at the same time she also goes against the

traditional Confucianist ideology, and breaks the "Nei-Wai" binary as she appears outside of the domestic sphere. The female protagonist here can be seen not only within the household but also in the street and school. She is shown as a mother who can support herself and her son alone (albeit via prostitution). She is also fulfilling a traditional male function of providing education for the child and shielding him from abuse and rumours. The depiction of a self-sufficient mother devastates the stereotypical 'soft' archetypes of Chinese women.

As such, the portrayal of the mother's image is controversial, as she has given all her life's meaning and motivations to her son. She is a self-sufficient mother but attributes all life motives and meaning to the child instead of herself. She fulfils the role of both parents by supporting her son financially and emotionally, which creates an image of a strong and supportive mother even though she is treated disrespectfully and unfairly by society. When confronted by the gangster who is stealing from her, she looks unafraid and even argues with him. A medium close-up shot presents the mother and the gangster standing on the left and right sides of the frame, and shows her as smaller and less physically able than the gangster (See *Figure 2*). However, a close-up shot follows, showing the rage in her indignant facial expression, and she stares directly at the gangster without fear in her eye. Then a medium shot presents the mother grabbing the gangster by the collar, asking for the money back. She is motivated to provide her son with a brighter life, so when the gangster steals the money for her son's tuition, she does not hesitate to confront him alone. The scene consists of her 'ideal' mother figure who gives her child unconditional support and love even stands up combating a physically stronger gangster. However, this is also the only moment in the film that she bravely confronts anyone. As a prostitute however, she resigns to her fate, enduring the rumours. She seems to have lost sight of herself as an individual, but emphasises her relational self in her motherhood, which makes her an idiographic example of a traditional Chinese women, obedient to son after the husband role is missing. The passive and obedient mother is praised in traditional Confucian concepts.



*Figure 2.* Conflict between the mother and the Gangster

While the female protagonist is depicted as a prostitute, there is a deviation from Confucian and feminist values toward womanhood. In the film, the common prejudice toward prostitutes is

represented from three perspectives: male/male clients, female/female neighbours, and the prostituted protagonist herself. In the male perspective, the protagonist is merely a commodity which is shown in the scene of the woman seeking male clients on the busy street. A male character glances at her body up and down, then leaves with disregard, followed by another male beggar. He stands next to her, staring at her body. The female protagonist is being viewed through the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). To some extent the male gangster occupies the primary and dominant position while the woman is a passive object of pleasure for him. The close-up of her and the medium shots between her and the gangster, show the unequal power between them; and also, the sexual objectification of the gangster. Another example that shows the woman as a pure sex object for males is the scene in which the gangster and his friends have dinner in her house. The male characters in the scene sit on chairs and eat but she is left standing alone next to the gangster. The gangster treats her as his private property and claims their relationship is good for her because of her single mother identity. She is an outsider in a male dominated.

The female characters in the film, like that of the neighbours, parents of students, and even the woman herself, identify prostitutes as disreputable, and able to corrupt innocent children. Prostitutes have been seen in Chinese culture as person without human rights. They should be avoided always. The Republican government saw prostitutes as an impediment in the process of building a modern nation. The school committees and parents of other students in *The Goddess* (1934) portray the views of the Republican government by looking down on the woman, asserting that having any connection to her son in the school would defame the school's reputation. The woman cannot join the social interaction, and it is impossible to change her social status in life. She perceives herself and her work as tainting the son's bright future. At the movie's end, she begs the principal to tell her son she is dead because having a prostitute mother makes people look down on him.

Women's prostitution in film is usually displayed in images of women's nudity and sexual intercourse to visually attract and pleasure the audience. However, *The Goddess* (1934) contains no sexual scenes, which implies the protagonist's prostitution is the phenomenon of patriarchal society and unbalanced opportunities for women. She has little autonomy and self-determination in public; her destiny depends on what the males and the society want. The tragic fate of the woman reveals the real lives of ordinary Chinese women in the Republican era who suffered long-term gender oppression and consequently became the victim of the patriarchal society.

#### 4.2.3 *New Women* (1935) Narrative

Wei Ming, an educated young woman, eloped with her boyfriend for 'free love' but was left by the man during pregnancy. She conceals her single motherhood and supports herself by teaching music at a private girl's school in Shanghai. Wei Ming enjoys writing novels and recently had one commissioned by a Shanghai publishing house editor named Yu Haichou. However, the manager only agrees to publish Wei Ming's novel if there is a photo of her on the front cover and will pay her only ten percent of the royalties after publication.

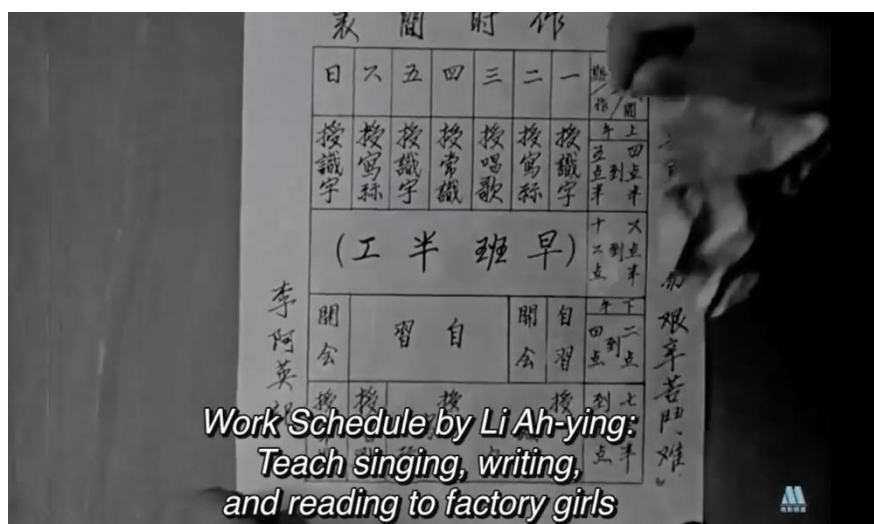
In another scene, Wei Ming is expelled from her job at the school due to Mr Wang's revenge when Wei Ming rejected his seduction. Meanwhile, Wei Ming's sister brings her sick daughter to Shanghai, forcing Wei Ming to turn to prostitution to pay for the medical bills. Dramatically, her first client is Mr Wang, who later fabricates news about Wei Ming's situation to humiliate her. Despite her efforts to save her child, the child ultimately passes away, and Wei Ming, unable to cope with the reality, takes sleeping pills to end her life. As Wei Ming lies in the hospital, Yu Haichou visits her, and a newspaper with the fabricated news arrives. After seeing the humiliating news, Wei Ming screams out for her desire to live but tragically dies. The Shanghai publishing house offers to sponsor Wei Ming's funeral, but only as a publicity stunt.

#### 4.2.4 Women's representation in *New Women* (1935)

The female representation in the film mainly centres on three characters: Wei Ming, Aying, and Mrs Wang. Wei Ming and Aying who are notable feminist icons of the Republican era, known as "new women" or "modern women", show opposition to the Confucius' gender ideals, and advocate for gender equality. Meanwhile, Mrs Wang is a typical traditional wealthy wife who relies on her husband for survival. Ming and Aying breach the "nei-wai" binary by interacting with men in public, an archetype advocated by Western-influenced Chinese male intellectuals to promote modernity in China. The portrayal of independent female characters shows the optimal feminist influences on women in the Republican era, demonstrating that women could undertake various roles outside the home, including those of a teacher, writer, and student. Additionally, the depiction of the traditional wife, Mrs Wang, makes a contrast with the "new women" of Wei Ming and Aying, thus raising the question of what a "new woman" looks like compared to the traditionalist women.

The representation of female protagonists Wei Ming and Aying is undoubtedly a symbol of the positive influence of Western ideologies of gender on Chinese women who seek independence and self-fulfilment. It shows that womanhood is no longer culturally ruled by Confucianist ideologies that trap women inside the household. The depiction of an active, determined, and independent woman is conveyed primarily through the scene of Aying teaching singing in a silk factory with all-female workers. A medium-long shot shows Aying standing in the back with a

blackboard behind her, holding a script, and passionately waving her hands while teaching singing. Then, a medium close-up shot with a low angle focus on Aying's unwavering facial expression delivers her enthusiasm in teaching and her proactive approach to work. Moreover, the close-up shot of Aying's work schedule teaching female union workers further proves her inspiring and resilient womanhood. The image of Aying's working schedule on the wall (See *Figure.3*) shows that she not only teaches singing but also writing, reading, and general knowledge at the female union. Additionally, she also sets aside time for self-studying during her free time, indicating a well-organized and hard-working figure. Her passionate promotion of female independence by teaching essential skills to women in the silk factory demonstrates her active advocacy of feminism and the "new woman" figure in the Republican era. Aying is an untraditional Chinese woman in the film who embodies the optimal changes of Chinese women in the feminist movements by showcasing her independence and determination in her occupation and life, in contrast to the obedient housewife image of Confucian gender ideology. The illustration of the new womanhood displays new images of extroverted and ambitious women in work and life.



*Figure 3.* Aying's Work Schedule on the Wall

Wei Ming's desire to become a writer in the modern city of Shanghai exemplifies the portrayal of a never-fallen woman who refuses to be defeated by societal pressures and gender expectations. The identity of a Chinese woman was traditionally shaped by her unwavering submission and deference to her husband's household upon marriage, along with her enduring connection to it (Leung, 2003). However, Wei Ming does not fall into the traditional notion of woman, who demonstrates a fearless spirit in venturing beyond the confines of her household. She is resolute in carving her own path within society, undeterred by the weight of social oppression that seeks to impede her progress. The never-fallen woman, discovered through her bravery, seeks personal fulfilment alone after being abandoned by her husband, refusing Mr Wang's seduction, and being expelled from school. She stays creative and motivated in writing even when unequally treated

by the publishing house. Despite facing numerous obstacles in seeking a meaningful life in Shanghai, she never gives up during the struggles. Wei Ming not only receives gender discrimination from men, but also from her female classmate Mrs Wang due to her ordinary living conditions without a prominent family background. It would have been difficult for a woman to live alone in a modern city in that period, but Wei Ming will not easily be defeated in life. Even though she is a woman writer facing financial and social obstacles in society, she smiles and never falls in front of difficulties. The metaphor of the roly-poly toy here represents a determined woman image in the public sphere, which works alongside feminist ideologies, showing an independent subject.

Despite being portrayed as a "never-fallen" woman, Wei Ming is also objectified and consumed by others, revealing women's actual status in this early stage of feminism in China. Wei Ming presents as both an active person and a passive object for men, and some women to consume. Initially, the publishing house manager rejects Wei Ming's novel due to its unappealing title and her unknown status. However, his attitude dramatically changes when he sees Wei Ming's portrait photo. A close-up shot centres on Wei Ming's portrait held by the manager, in which the characters and audiences see Wei Ming's beauty (see *Figure 4*). Then, a medium shot shows the manager ogling at the photo with a smirk, recognizing the unique selling proposition of the "female" gender and the "beauty" of the writer. This illustrates how the patriarchal society limited opportunities for women and saw their appearance as objects. The publishing house manager writes "Miss" on the front cover of Wei Ming's novel and places her photo next to it, neglecting her wisdom and highlighting her beauty. The behaviour implies that a beautiful female writer's image guarantees the novel's sales in the market, regardless of its content quality. This unequal recognition of female writers by men suggests that their ability and creativity in writing is less valued than their physical appearance. The shot reveals that the conditions of gender equality were still immature, and the feminist movement was only superficial to a certain extent. The representation of women as an objectified image implies that their fate still depended on how the public, mainly men, wanted them to be perceived within this "new women" look of the Republican era.



Figure 4. Wei Ming's Novel and Her Portrait

The third female character, Mrs Wang, is depicted as a typical Chinese housewife who conforms to traditional Chinese gender roles. She remains in the domestic sphere and relies on her wealthy husband for support. Despite her husband's infidelity, she enjoys extravagant spending, using it to display her social status. Mrs Wang's relationship with her husband reflects the traditional inferiority of Chinese women compared to men and their lack of agency in breaking free from gender inequality. Even though she herself is reliant on her husband's wealth, she looks down on Aying and Wei Ming due to their living situations and occupations. She likes being referred to as Mrs Wang, as it highlights her husband's affluent status. This portrayal of a traditional female figure reflects the pervasive influence of Confucianism's unequal gender concepts, with many women still willing to position themselves below men. Mrs Wang's luxurious lifestyle stands in sharp contrast to Wei Ming's difficult life, which ironically represents the painful journey of independent women seeking autonomy. Even women who boldly enter society must still face severe gender discrimination, not only due to patriarchal rules but also due to traditional gender roles and obligations within the household.

#### 4.2.5 Theme analysis -- Gender relations

The films *The Goddess* (1934) and *New Women* (1935) emphasize the gender inequalities prevalent in society by depicting male characters as having more autonomy and occupying diverse job roles compared to the female characters. In *The Goddess* (1934), the male characters, such as school principals and school committee members, and in *New Women* (1935), the publications manager and school board ministers, are shown as authoritative figures who dictate the lives of women. On the other hand, women are portrayed as having fewer job opportunities and are limited to roles such as teachers, housewives, and prostitutes, who are constrained by societal expectations. Though the gangster in *The Goddess* (1934) belongs to a lower social class, he holds power over women; more importantly, he is not subjected to the same sexual oppression as

women. The disparity in occupational choices for men and women in the films illustrates society's patriarchal nature that restricts women's prospects.

Male characters in the films are depicted as having autonomy in their occupations and wielding power over their own lives. For example, in *The Goddess* (1934), the school principal demonstrates self-determination and independence when he opposes the teaching philosophy of the school committee and chooses to leave his job. In contrast, the female character Wei Ming in *New Women* (1935) holds a subordinate position as a teacher and is ultimately fired for refusing the seduction from the school board minister, Mr Wang. After losing her job, Wei Ming is unable to afford medical care for her daughter and is forced to turn to prostitution. This contrast in the outcomes for the two characters illustrates the passive and subordinate status of women in both the workplace and society at large.

Male privilege persists even in the context of women's liberation, leading to women being viewed as objects rather than equal societal partners. Many men are unable or unwilling to recognize the fundamental inequalities and injustices that women face. In *The Goddess* (1934), male privilege is evident through the unequal representation of male and female members on the school committee. During the scene where the principal meets with the committee, eight males and only one female member mirrors the deeply ingrained Confucian social order where males dominate society and women struggle to gain equal rights in an unequal workplace under traditional gender concepts. Male privilege also manifests in the unequal royalty payments to Wei Ming in *New Women* (1935). She is entitled to only ten percent of the royalties paid after the book publishing because of her gender. This unequal treatment of women shows that the advocacy for women's liberation was often superficial, and that women's rights were only realized under the guarantee of men's rights. Furthermore, Wei Ming is objectified by the publishing house manager, who ignores her writing talent and focuses solely on her physical beauty. Male managers often overlook the unjust treatment of female writers and use them to generate profits. Women's liberation has often become a mere stunt that caters to the socio-political movement for male goals and national flourishing.

Moreover, the emphasis on women's familial roles in society also perpetuates the stereotype of women as being defined solely in relation to men. Women's values are often tied to their domestic behaviour and nurturing abilities, which stems from Confucian gender ideology. In both films, only the role of the devoted mother is praised and valued by society, while an independent woman in society is met with prejudice and obstacles. The nameless mother in *The Goddess* (1934) is a prostitute who works to provide a better life for her son. Her portrayal as a dedicated mother who sacrifices her body for her child's well-being elevates her to goddess-like status and garners admiration from audiences. However, her story also highlights the traditional gender roles of

women as submissive and devoted mothers, emphasizing the unchanging nature of women's kinship duties. The contrast between her double identities as a prostitute and a mother highlights the mother's self-sacrifice that is expected of women from society but also reveals the limitations of feminism and gender relations in the Republican era. Moreover, the film's focus on the mother's kinship role underscores the continued importance of motherhood in Chinese society, while the father figure is conspicuously absent from the familial scene.

The film *New Women* (1935) also portrays an independent, educated female protagonist who ultimately takes on the role of a devoted mother, sacrificing her dignity by selling her body for the sake of her child. Her decision to conceal the fact that she has a child in Shanghai reflects the limited opportunities available for women, particularly those with children. The setting highlights the societal perception that children hinder women's development in society, while men do not face the same constraints due to their gender. During the social movement of New Women in the Republican era, women could access education and work, as the society recognized their capacity to contribute alongside men to the nation's development. However, in both films, male roles in the household are portrayed as absent, with father figures missing. This absence underscores the continued dominance of men in society, as they hold a superior status and control women, using them for their own purposes.

#### 4.3 Mao Era

The Chinese Communist Party utilized films during the Mao era as a means of propaganda aimed at mentally and physically moulding the Chinese population into the proletariat. This propaganda approach limited the genres of the film to sole storytelling of the resistant Chinese Communist Party during the Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese Civil War (Chen, 2003). Gender differences during this period were viewed as the bourgeoisie, with men identified as the upper class who held physical, cultural, and financial power by the communists, based on Marxist gender theories that needed to eliminate. *Song of Youth* (1959) portrays the revolutionary journey of a young woman, Daojing Lin, from a hopeless young woman to a determined revolutionary of the Chinese Communist Party, aided by two male characters in the film. Similarly, *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961) is a female-centred film that depicts the transformation of a slave girl, Qionghua Wu, into the leader of the Women's Red Detachment of the Chinese Communist Party, which fought against feudal landlords with the help and support of communist Changqing Hong. Women's power and ability are represented as independent and determined, taking part in the journey of national flourishing alongside men.

##### 4.3.1 *Song of Youth* (1959) Narrative

Daojing Lin escapes an arranged marriage and ends up homeless. She is rescued by Yonze Yu, a Beijing University student, and they develop feelings for each other. With Yu's help, Daojing becomes a teacher at a primary school. During her time there, she meets Jiachuan Lu, a communist, and is inspired by his beliefs. After giving an anti-Japanese speech in class, she is expelled from school for violating the Nationalist Party's policy. Daojing then joins the communist student movements led by Lu to fight against the Japanese invasion.

Daojing Lin marries Yongze Yu after being unable to find employment in Beijing but gradually becomes dissatisfied with her role as a housewife. Their differing political views lead to a deteriorating marriage, and Jiachuan Lu's arrest causes them to divorce. Daojing becomes a teacher in a rural school with the arrangement by communist members and organizes tenant protests against the Nationalist government. She is arrested for her communist activities and speech, meets another communist in prison, and becomes devoted to the movement after her release on bail. She finally leads the student movement for revolution as a royal communist.

#### 4.3.2 Women's representation in *Song of Youth* (1959)

Daojing Lin, in the film *Song of Youth* (1959), exemplifies how feminism has influenced Chinese society and helped women achieve equality with men during the political revolution. She symbolizes the positive consequences of feminism through her actions and beliefs. She fights for freedom, takes control of her relationships, and finds fulfilment through involvement in the communist revolution. The film portrays educated women who fight for the Chinese Communist Party as role models rather than the traditional roles of devoted wives and mothers. This shift in attitude reflects the positive change in society towards women, where they gained autonomy and gender equality.

The film *Song of Youth* (1959) depicts a positive transformation in women's attitudes and consciousness, particularly regarding marriage and employment, in contrast to traditional Confucian gender theory. The character Daojing refuses to be seen as a subordinate "men's appendage" and instead becomes an independent thinker, as demonstrated by her marriage to Yongze Yu. In a scene where she rejects Yongze's proposal after losing her job due to an anti-Japanese speech, a medium close-up shot shows the two characters cuddling in a romantic atmosphere. Following by a close-up shot shows Daojing looking directly into Yongze's eyes, firmly rejecting his proposal despite her love for him. She expresses her desire to become a respected and equal member of society without depending on male support. This rejection challenges the stereotype of women's dependency on men and underscores their pursuit of equality and personal fulfilment. The contrast between the romantic setting and the female character's choice highlights this further. The Communist Party believed that women's paid

employment outside the home was essential for their emancipation, leading to significant improvements in the status of Chinese women in society during the Mao era (Li & Zhang, 1994). Daojing's attitude reflects the changing self-awareness of Chinese women during the Mao era, where marriage was no longer considered an essential part of womanhood but a personal endeavour. Furthermore, her active pursuit of becoming a genuine member of society challenges the conventional gender roles imposed by Confucianism and reflects the positive impact of the women's emancipation movement.

Despite having aspirations of becoming an independent woman and achieving her societal goals, Daojing ultimately marries Yongze due to her inability to find work and support herself, highlighting the ongoing societal restrictions on women. Women's desires to fulfil themselves in society are often thwarted, finally becoming homemakers. In the scene where Daojing prepares a fancy meal for her husband's homecoming, the two characters are depicted in a medium shot as the woman serves rice to her husband. The man sits next to her and looks at the entire table of dishes with a smile, showcasing a traditional woman who fulfils her familial obligations. However, the husband passing the chopsticks to Daojing with a smile while she serves the rice (See *Figure. 5*) challenges the traditional unequal marital relationship, breaking the conventional inferior female gender role of serving and nurturing. The mutual care and respect shown by the two characters demonstrate the improvement of women's familial status. Daojing's free will to remain independent does not disappear in her marriage. She confidently tells her husband that she will never give up being independent, reflecting how the Communist Party's mobilization of women's liberation has successfully influenced women's cognitions.



*Figure 5.* Daojing Lin Serves Rice for the Husband

Daojing Lin continues to assert her independence in her marriage to Yongze Yu during a quarrel over their differing political beliefs. As her husband complains about her frequent participation

in communist activities, the camera focuses on a medium close-up of Daojing's defiant expression. The shots then cut back and forth between Daojing and her husband, with Daojing appearing in bright, glowing lighting that depicts her transformation from a hopeless woman to an empowered one after joining the communist revolution. When her husband demands obedience, stating, "You must obey me because you are my wife," Daojing files for divorce promptly without fear or hesitation. The scene ends with a medium close-up of Daojing's eyes and a long shot of her leaving the house at night with a suitcase.

This quarrel scene illustrates numerous meanings regarding Chinese women and feminism, as Daojing Lin takes the initiative in her romantic relationship and political intention. Her tenacious resistance to arranged marriage mirrors her awakening of women's consciousness and autonomously opposing the harm that feudalism brings to women. She refuses to become a traditional kinship role of wife and mother through her strong will to fulfil her pursuit in the socio-political sphere, even in her self-determined marriage. Women's rights have generally increased in conjunction with women's cognitive awakening, representing independent consciousness both inside and outside the household. Daojing maintains independence in her marriage and is not always submissive to her spouse, mainly when dealing with opposing political ideologies. Her depiction contradicts traditional Confucian ideals, which require the wife to be submissive and obedient to her husband, but she disrupts the patriarchal familial pattern with her desire to be an independent person, both physically and mentally, in society.

Daojing Lin is also depicted as a female warrior determined to resist social inequality in her life, even attempting suicide without fear to express her opposition to an arranged marriage. The film's opening scene establishes a depressing atmosphere with several shots of monstrous waves and heavy clouds. An extreme long shot shows Daojing walking straight towards the sea, and a close-up shot focuses on her facial expression as she stands on the cliff. Although her eyes sparkle with tears, her serious and decisive expression conveys the message that suicide is her way of resisting oppression, and she jumps into the sea without hesitation. Daojing Lin rejects the traditional image of women as tranquil, soft, and submissive, as described in the 'Yin-yang' theory, and becomes a courageous warrior in combat against oppression. The depiction of her suicidal behaviour illustrates women's resentment towards arranged marriage and patriarchal society rather than portraying them as weak in society. The actress's performance creates a non-stereotypical female figure.

Women warrior figures frequently appear in the film, and the scene of Daojing's imprisonment highlights this. The imprisonment scene features three Chinese female communists who defy the traditional archetype of the 'soft' woman image and are valiant in fighting for the better future of the Chinese Communist Party and the nation. In the prison scene, the female characters are not

portrayed as sexy objects focused on their shaped bodies to attract the audience. Instead, front lighting with a medium close-up highlight the upright and determined woman warrior figures. The camera emphasizes the characters' facial expressions, and the red blood and wood on their faces strongly contrast with their determined and illuminated eyes. As the female communist Hong Lin says, 'As members of the Chinese Communist Party, we cannot stop fighting for social equality and national flourishing until we die'. The female characters represent the new awakening women figures in the Mao era who are courageous and determined in the struggle of socio-political movements, becoming independent mentally and physically in the journey of revolution. Their image challenges the traditional 'soft' and interdependent image of women. Moreover, the representation of women as warriors shows that Chinese women in the Mao era were influenced by feminism and held steadfast beliefs in revolution and actively promoted equality.



*Figure 6. The Imprisoned Female Chinese Communists*

#### 4.3.3 The Red Detachment of Women (1961) Narrative

Qionghua Wu comes from a low-income family and is enslaved by the cruel landlord Batian Nan in the Yelin village on Hainan Island. Despite her attempts to escape, she fails and is punished by the landlord. One day, Changqing Hong, a representative of the Chinese Communist Party, disguises himself as a wealthy businessman to investigate Yelin village and purchases Qionghua to rescue her. He encourages her to join the Red Detachment of Women, and on her journey, she meets Honglian, who is escaping a forced marriage and also decides to join the Red Detachment of Women. After witnessing a military parade by the women's detachment, Qionghua and Honglian are inspired to join the military.

Qionghua, while on a scouting mission, meets her cruel former landlord Batian Nan, and shoots him out of anger for his past treatment of her without permission from her leader, causing the mission to fail. She is punished for breaking military discipline upon returning to the revolutionary

base. Changqing Hong, the representative of the Communist Party, becomes her mentor and teaches her the importance of relying on the collective and fighting for collective goals. The Chinese Communist Party sends Changqing Hong to liberate Yelin village from the control of cruel landlord Batian Nan. Qionghua disguises herself as Changqing's servant and joins the mission, capturing Batian Nan alive. However, conflict arises between the Communist Party and the Chinese Nationalist Party, causing Batian Nan to escape. The Communist representative Changqing sacrifice himself, inspiring Qionghua to become a leader in the Red Detachment of Women. With Changqing's guidance, Qionghua leads the women's detachment to victory in the revolutionary struggle, executing Batian Nan and achieving their collective goals.

#### 4.3.4 Women's representation in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961)

There is a juxtaposition between the non-traditional Maoist concept of "iron" womanhood and the Confucian notion of the subordinate daughter, as portrayed in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961) through the character of Qionghua Wu and the female soldiers. While Qionghua is an independent woman who seeks autonomy in her life, she blindly follows the Communist Party and becomes a psychologically subordinate daughter to the party, highlighting the contrast between the Maoist feminism that promotes the image of masculine women but also sees women as inferior followers. This contrast illustrates the ambiguity of improving Chinese women's rights under the underlying patriarchal Maoist political background. The transformation of Qionghua from a servant to a determined leader represents an ambiguous improvement of Chinese women's rights under this political system.

*The Red Detachment of Women* (1961) creates a decisive female warrior figure that targets and attacks Confucian moral values and gender norms in traditional Chinese society. Female soldiers are depicted in loose uniforms with short hair, hiding their feminine characteristics but portraying female masculinities as men. Female warriors are consistently represented in the film through the protagonist Qionghua and all members of the women's detachment. In the scene of the military parade showing the women's detachment at the beginning of the film, female soldier figures represent the Maoist promoted womanhood that enters the political sphere and works alongside men. The masses of soldiers, including both women and men, are in the same uniform and excitedly respond to the call from the party representative. In the montage, a female leader strides onto the stage, draws herself up to a military posture, and salutes the representative. A medium shot captures her taking a red flag from the representative; then a close-up focuses on the flying red flag with the title "The Red Detachment of Women" highlighted (See *Figure 7*). The masculine women warrior figure deconstructs Confucian values portrayed in the scene. The shot of the female leader taking the red flag from the male representative also shows that women undertake roles and obligations alongside men. This scene portrays a relatively equal political

status between genders, highlighting gender equality under the regulation of the Chinese Communist Party. The representation of the women's detachment reflects a new construction of Chinese womanhood that challenges the traditional "soft" image of women in the domestic sphere and represents women's masculine power in the political sphere alongside men.



*Figure 7.* The Female Soldiers in the Red Detachment

Furthermore, the fearless and tough female warriors who display their determination in the military as "iron" women fighting alongside men can be seen in the following scene of the female detachment's daily training. In a montage, the female soldiers rise to train every morning before sunrise. A long shot shows the harsh living conditions of the dormitory, and all the female soldiers are covered in loose military uniforms with short hair. The montage depicts women soldiers training, studying, and doing chores with other male soldiers, creating harmony and equal gender relations but also highlighting female masculinity through male-like dress and behaviour.

Subsequently, the image of the female protagonist Qionghua standing guard on a heavy rainy day represents her tanned skin and decisive eyes portrayed in a medium close-up shot with the background of the sunrise (See *Figure 8*). The image of Qionghua shows that women can also have an iron will to protect the collective. The absence of traditionally feminine characteristics further emphasizes the image of a tough female warrior. The depiction of women soldiers in their daily routine shatters the traditional Confucian image of women and promotes a new image of a fearless and tough female warrior whose roles and obligations were modified in society and promoted by Chairman Mao and the Chinese Communist Party.



*Figure 8.* Qionghua stands guard

The portrayal of the female protagonist Qionghua Wu as a fearless female warrior constantly approves the slogan of Chairman Mao (1964) "Whatever men can do, women can do too". Qionghua's identity as a female warrior against the Confucian notion of yielding and tranquillity but showing her determination and capability. After the party representative Changqing Hong's scarification in the battle with the Nationalist Party, Qionghua's inner state changes from an immature daughter of Communist party to a decisive and brave female Communist leader. Qionghua finds Changqing Hong's bag in ruins with a close-up shot focus on her application form of joining the Chinese Communist Party with a red official seal approved by the Communist Party. Then the frame cuts to Qionghua's face in a close-up (See Figure 9). Her gender cannot be identified in this close-up shot as the mud on her tanned face and her short black hair blend into the dark background. However, her highlighted decisive eyes convey the message that she can assume the role and obligations the male party representative grants her. Qionghua, a fearless female warrior, disrupts the patriarchal woman role with her determination and valianation reflects from the detailed portrayal of her facial expression. As an female soldier, Qionghua challenges the Confucian kinship role of woman but represent women can also do what men can do in defending one's own beliefs and nation.

Qionghua's depiction as a valiant female warrior signifies the improvement in the image of Chinese women in society and breaks the stereotype of inferiority. However, the portrayal of gender-ambiguous female figures blurs their gender identity into masculinity, violating feminist ideals. While women's social power might have increased under Maoist feminism, they still lacked the autonomous expression of sexuality that arises from an individualized female consciousness (Leung, 2003). The portrayal stereotypes women warriors as male-like, disregarding their innate feminine traits. It fails to acknowledge the differences between genders

and merely implies that women can achieve equality with men by assuming male characteristics, as the Communist Party asserted. On the one hand, this portrayal blurs female gender identity and encourages women to abandon their natural characteristics. On the other hand, the masculine female figures in the socio-political sphere indicate the advancement of female social status through their frequent presence in public under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. The depiction of gender-ambiguous female figures is arguable, but it still represents an optimal change for women under the influence of the enduring Confucian philosophy in China, as they receive more opportunities to present themselves outside the home and strive for greater independence in society.

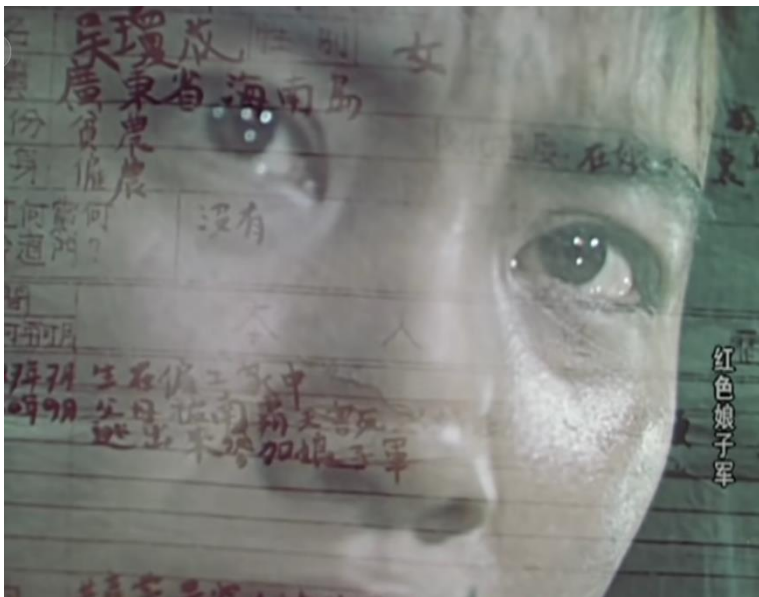


Figure 9. Ambiguous Gender depiction of Qionghua

The film portrays Qionghua and the female soldiers as fearless warriors, reflecting the improved socio-political rights towards women under the Chinese Communist Party. However, the female soldiers take on a subordinate daughter role that adheres to the Confucian concept of 'filial piety', and unconditionally submits to the communist representative and party after joining the women's red detachment. Qionghua follows orders from the 'father' without question, and there is no opposition within the party's family-like structure to women following their leader's words. It first shows through her blind political participation in the Communist Party when Changqing Hong, the Communist Party representative, rescued her. In the scene where she first arrives in the revolutionary base era, she is confused with vague political knowledge about the Communist Party. However, she blindly follows the formation of the women's detachment during the military parade. A montage shows the female soldiers in blue military uniforms with short hair and holding weapons, who follow the leader's command in the formation. Then, the camera shifts to Qionghua and her friend Honglian, who follow at the back of the formation, looking around confusedly. The

contrast between Qionghua and the female soldiers is presented through their different appearances. Qionghua, in a red cloth with long hair, is conspicuous in the whole group. A medium close-up shot focuses on the female leader who looks at these two unfamiliar women up and down and then asks, "Are you proletarian?" The image of the female leader demonstrates the model of a proletarian woman and then zooms out to shift the focus on the two women, implying the expectation of how these two women should behave as proletarians in the communist context. Qionghua and Honglian look at each other with confused facial expressions, and nobody replies to the female leader. The close-up shot of the two women's facial expressions implies their unawareness of the meaning of proletarian and even class struggle, which the Chinese Communist Party is against. The persistence of the two women characters joining the military becomes inexplicable. Female figures were moulded into a discursive tool and semiotic symbol to construct a central narrative of communist and revolutionary history (Cui, 2003). Furthermore, the rationale behind their determination to join the party approves of the subordinate daughter role, who unconditionally follows the father's words and fulfils the filial piety duties of joining and fighting for the party.

The following scene, where a female soldier in the formation explains, "If you do not own any land, you are a proletarian", consistently portrays the subordinate daughter role of female characters. The female soldier's words reveal that these female soldiers in the formation have a very limited understanding of social class and revolution. Their comprehension of the proletariat is simply related to personal property, namely land, and they lack a personal perspective on socio-political issues. Their awareness of the class conflict solely based on the education provided by the party and male leaders. Although women are shown working alongside men in the red detachment fighting for emancipation from social oppression, their representation of the inner state is plain. Despite breaking the Confucian gender rules that exist in the political sphere, women still have to obey the ideological father and passively follow him. Therefore, while the film portrays an enhancement of women's social status, it does not necessarily represent an improvement in feminism.

Additionally, the female lead character is expected to prioritize the collective goals of the party over her personal desire for revenge, under the guidance of the ideological "father". Qionghua receives education about Maoist communist ideology and collectivism from Changqing Hong after her initial attempt to take revenge on her former landlord, Batian Nan, during her first reconnaissance mission.

At the training ground where Qionghua encounters the party's representative and the female leader, a medium shot frames Qionghua and Honglian on the left side of the screen, dressed in their personal clothes with braided hair, while the party representative and female leader stand on the

right in their blue uniforms. The framing effectively separates the desired model of a female soldier according to the party's standards from the portrayal of an unrestrained daughter. The image strongly implies that a woman who prioritizes personal desires over the collective goal of the Chinese Communist Party is not fit to don the military uniform and join the party. As Qionghua looks up at the male representative to explain, the camera shifts to a close-up shot of him asking, "What and whom are you fighting for?" Then, Qionghua's face cuts in using a close-up as she frowns and lowers her head, indicating her vague understanding of class consciousness and limited knowledge of political class and Communist ideology.

In the following story, Qionghua's transformation is depicted through her clothing. She afterwards wears a military uniform and cuts her hair short, symbolizing her determination to become a revolutionary and a subordinate daughter who prioritizes the Communist Party's emancipation over personal desires. However, portraying Qionghua, the female lead, as a subordinate "daughter" and female warrior figure overlooks the feminist awareness of being an individual who passively follows the father's words. While the female characters in the film break away from some traditional archetypes of inferior women, they still adhere to patriarchal ideologies that benefit the "father" and "family" rather than individual autonomy. The movie consistently conveys the message that women's emancipation must occur under Communist regulation, with women expected to subordinate themselves to the party and male leaders. The CCP's patriarchal bias towards biological differences hindered women's liberation by portraying them as less capable and astute, driven by narrower interests than men (Roberts, 2019). While the social status of women ambiguously increased in the Mao era, the patriarchal society and gender oppression were ultimately upheld under Communist ideology.

#### 4.3.5 Theme analysis -- Gender relations

During the Mao era, gender relations saw a significant improvement in terms of equality, with women being more visible in public spaces, particularly in politics. This increased visibility was not solely due to government efforts to mobilize the female population for economic development but rather reflected a broader shift in social and political attitudes towards gender roles. Women have become indispensable partners in the national revolution during the turbulent war period. In the films *Song of Youth* (1959) and *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961) of the Mao era, women have the same rights as men to join the revolutionaries and become royal members of the Chinese Communist Party, which has never happened before. In the student protest scene in *Song of Youth* (1959), many female students in the crowd demonstrate their decisiveness and determination to protect the country from invasion. As physical conflict erupts between the students and the Chinese Nationalist Military during the protest march, the female students refuse to back down and display their physical strength and unwavering commitment to fighting for their nation and

beliefs. In this protest, female and male students stand as allies, equally devoted to achieving revolutionary goals and fighting for their rights. *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961) further reinforces the involvement of women in political activities during the Mao era, portraying women soldiers in the detachment as an essential and inseparable element of the Chinese Communist Party. They possess equal power to men in cultural and national revolutions. Female soldiers undergo joint training and studies with male soldiers, treating each other as intimate comrades without unequal gender treatment in the military. Both male and female soldiers share identical goals and cooperate to achieve communist objectives.

Cooperation between genders in Republican-era society was nearly impossible. Women were encouraged to participate in society for social, economic, and national advancement, but gender-based oppression perpetuated by Confucianism remained a significant obstacle. In contrast to the Mao era, where fraternal relations between genders existed, women in Republican society were obviously viewed as subordinate to men, even if they desired independence. Men often regarded women as inferior and provided them with limited assistance. For instance, in *The Goddess* (1934), the unnamed mother, a single mother trying to enter the public sphere and relying solely on herself, resorts to prostitution for survival. Her tragic imprisonment ending highlights the harsh reality and hostility that women faced in society when striving for independence. During the Republican era, women seeking independence in society received little support from men or even other women, as feminist gender concepts were relatively new in this traditionally patriarchal society. The separation of genders in Republican society is also evident in *New Women* (1935), where the talented female writer Wei Ming cannot receive equal treatment in her occupation and daily life, despite her education and commitment to the movement for women's emancipation. The experiences of these two female protagonists reflect the superficial understanding and limited mobility of feminism in the Republican era compared to the Mao era. Men encouraged women to enter society and work alongside them for the nation's flourishing, but they often failed to re-evaluate the obstacles women faced in society and provide support for independent women.

The cooperative gender relations that emerged in the Mao era were established under the rules of the Chinese Communist Party, which considered gender differences a class struggle that had to be eliminated. Consequently, "sibling-like" gender relations were promoted in society. For instance, both female protagonists in Mao-era films, Daojing Lin and Qionghua Wu, received assistance from male comrades in their revolutionary journey and ultimately became honourable members of the Chinese Communist Party. In both films, *Song of Youth* (1959) and *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961), the protest march of students, the revolutionary organization, and the Communist military featured an equal representation of genders actively and decisively fighting for communist goals for the nation.

More importantly, female protagonists no longer followed the "soft" archetype of women constrained by patriarchal rules. Instead, they became brave female warriors and heroines who cooperated with male communists and soldiers during the Communist Revolution. The optimal change in gender relations was reflected in the active help from men in their interactions with female protagonists. The representation of cooperation between genders shows that women's power was seen, and the attitude and perception towards women also improved, especially in the political sphere.

After being guided and supported by male communists, female leadership was present through Qionghua Wu in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961), who headed the women's detachment and ultimately emancipated Yelin Village from the bourgeoisie. Daojing Lin and other female revolutionaries in *Song of Youth* (1959) became core members of revolutionary missions who would never betray the communist belief, even when tortured in prison. Although the male guidance in the films was ambiguous, as they were somehow the "psychological father" to the female protagonists, they undoubtedly helped and supported the women in their plights and encouraged women to fulfil their political goals. Under the mobilization of women's liberation by the government and support from communists, women gained opportunities to join the society, especially the political sphere, and shared equal rights and treatment with men.

Moreover, the imbalanced gender relations in spousal relationships have been addressed through the portrayal of Daojing Lin in *Song of Youth* (1959). Daojing possesses the power to initiate or terminate a marriage, leading to more balanced gender relations. The wife in the story is courageous and unrestrained in expressing her thoughts, and the husband shows respect towards her. In the proposal scene, the husband defends his wife's decision to decline his proposal and supports her desire to become a more independent individual in society. Furthermore, Daojing is not forced to be a housewife after marriage and is even encouraged by her husband to fulfil her desire for independence. This representation of marriage breaks traditional wife obligations, such as being submissive and obedient to the husband.

The relatively equal relationship between the couple reflects positive changes in people's perception of womanhood during the Mao era. However, in the previous era of Republican China, relatively equal relations in romantic relationships were missing. Both female protagonists in films were forsaken by their husbands without reason and had to raise their children alone. The unfortunate ending of these intimate relationships reflects that men held the agency in the relationship while women were expected to follow. Women's hardship in survival after being abandoned reinforces the superior status of men in the Republican era. The spousal relationship in the Republican era supports Confucian gender ideologies that men master their wives while women follow their man's words. The contrast between female characters in marriages during the

Republican and Mao eras highlights the gradual enhancement of gender equality in romantic relationships, where women are no longer portrayed as submissive and obedient in romantic relationship.

Although films from the Mao era provide evidence that women's status in society and gender relations improved significantly, offering women more opportunities to pursue personal and political goals, patriarchal elements persist in gender interactions. For instance, these films often include "male saviour" or "male guidance" figures in female protagonists' journeys, suggesting that women require men's rescue and enlightenment. In *Song of Youth* (1959), the female protagonist Daojin Lin is saved by two male characters: one saves her life, and the other provides her with hope and direction. At the film's start, she is homeless and suicidal, but Yongze Yu saves her life and offers her a place to stay and a job teaching at a primary school. As the story unfolds, Jiachuan Lu appears as another male mentor in Daojing's life, teaching her about the Communist Revolution and helping her find purpose. In other words, the female protagonist cannot achieve self-independence and political awakening without the help of these two men. Similarly, in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961), Qionghua Wu is rescued by a male character, Changqing Hong, a representative of the Communist party. Initially impulsive and naive, Qionghua receives political education from Changqing and eventually becomes a female leader of the Communist party. The portrayal of male saviours and guidance in these films suggests that women should seek out men's advice and modify themselves to achieve gender equality. This reflects the unchangeable Confucian ideology of "Yin-yang" towards gender during the Mao era, which emphasized men's superiority over women. The presence of male saviour figures in gender relationships highlights the limitations of Maoist gender movements and the need to re-evaluate and study women and gender.

Finally, it is worth noting that during the Mao era, the Chinese Communist Party promoted feminism and used films as a propaganda tool to shape public opinion. The films presented the idea of equal political rights for both genders, but this equality was limited to the Party's regulations. While Maoist feminism did raise women's self-awareness in the socio-political sphere and promoted gender equality in society, it primarily benefited the Party rather than feminism itself. For example, in *Song of Youth* (1959), when Daojing Lin and two other female characters are imprisoned, they refuse to submit to the Chinese Nationalist Party's demands, even under torture. One of the female characters states, "We must fight for the Chinese Communist Party until we die." The scene reinforces the idea that women should sacrifice themselves for the Party's cause rather than their own. Similarly, in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961), Qionghua Wu prioritizes the Party's collective goals over her personal desires. The film teaches female characters and audiences that self-fulfilment can only be achieved by devoting oneself to the collective and the Party. Therefore, Maoist gender liberation positively changed the deeply

entrenched Confucian gender norms, giving women more rights and freedoms in public. However, these changes in women and gender relations tended to serve the Party's interests rather than those of women themselves.

#### 4.4 Post-Mao Era

The Reform and Opening up programme significantly changed Chinese filmmaking in the post-Mao era. Films reflect the mournful societal impacts of the previous Communist regime by exploring the theme of the ten-year Cultural Revolution, which became a popular topic due to the film industry's increased freedom in filmmaking with various themes (Wang, 2022). Female filmmakers produced many masterpieces that showcased women's active gender consciousness and their transformation from passive objects to active subjects. For instance, *Hibiscus Town* (1986) follows a strong-willed female entrepreneur who perseveres through being convicted as a class enemy during the Cultural Revolution. *Women Human Demon* (1987) is a female-centric film produced by female filmmaker Shuqin Huang that features a female opera performer who challenges traditional gender roles by playing male roles and becomes a popular and successful performer. These films reflect the positive impact of female researchers formally studying women as individual subjects and feminism during the post-Mao era in China, leading to more dynamic and self-aware women pursuing personal achievements.

##### 4.4.1 *Hibiscus Town* (1986) Narrative

Yuyin Hu and her husband started a successful bean curd soup business in Hibiscus Town and used their income to buy land and build a new house. They received a couplet from Shutian Qin, a former curator of the cultural centre who was later identified as a reactionary by the government. During the "Four Clean-ups" movement in 1963, Yuyin was targeted as a wealthy entrepreneur who had extorted money from local villagers. Yuyin and her husband became enemies of the town and were forced to flee, leaving their properties and business behind. Yuyin's husband was killed during the resistance, leaving Yuyin hopeless. Yuyin meets Shutian Qin, a former curator who was labelled a reactionary by the government, and he encourages her to live bravely.

After three years, Hibiscus Town became a socialist village. Qiushi Wang, one of the poorest villagers, became the leader of the "Four Clean-ups" movement and led the crusade against the wealthy. Yuyin and Shutian Qin fall in love and marry in secret, but their marriage is rejected by the village secretary due to Yuyin's pregnancy out of wedlock. Shortly after, they are caught, and Shutian is sentenced to ten years imprisonment. Yuyin remains in the village to raise their child alone. In 1979, the central government restored Yuyin's properties after the end of the "Four Clean-ups" movement, but the traumatic experiences of the Cultural Revolution remain. Shutian

returns to Hibiscus Town, and their bean curd restaurant reopens, but the traumatic memories of the past cannot be erased.

#### 4.4.2 Women's Representation in *Hibiscus Town* (1986)

Female representation in *Hibiscus Town* (1986) focuses on the female protagonist Yuyin Li. The depiction of her as a strong-willed woman shows women's active feminist self-consciousness whose characteristics go against the Confucian gender ideology that posits women as mentally and physically inferior to men due to the change in Chinese culture and society after the strict regulation by Chinese Communist party during the Mao era. She is an entrepreneur who get wealth due to her hard-working and hospitable in her bean-curd restaurant. She is brave and decisive in fighting against the unfair treatment toward her in the 'Four Clean-up' Movement. Moreover, she never hides behind any men interdependently in the decades of political persecution, who shows women's strong independent and active self-consciousness through the post-Mao film.

The female protagonist of *Hibiscus Town*, Yuyin Li, is depicted as a woman with a strong sense of self-awareness, who is hardworking and determined. She demonstrates her work ethic by running a successful business selling bean-curd soup, reflecting women's changing identity and role in society. The film opens with a close-up shot of Yuyin lighting a match and a candle in the darkness, followed by a scene of her grinding beans using a large stone grinder in her backyard (See *Figure 10*). Yuyin sings as she works, and her husband appears to help her prepare for the restaurant's opening. Through this montage, the film shows Yuyin's independence and hard work in her business, which challenges the traditional idea of women as subservient to husbands. The detailed depiction of Yuyin making bean curd soup shows her mastery of her family's business,



*Figure 10.* Montage illustrating Yuyin Preparing Bean curd

with her husband appearing as a supportive partner rather than a dominant figure. This portrayal of a financially and mentally independent woman represents a departure from traditional Confucian values and signals the rise of women's self-consciousness.

The following restaurant scene includes several close-up shots of Yuyin cooking soup, adding firewood, and adding toppings and sauces. The shots cut back and forth, creating a bustling atmosphere in Yuyin's restaurant. In the next shot, Yuyin effortlessly holds several bowls as she moves through her busy restaurant, skillfully greeting and serving customers. Yuyin is sociable and hospitable compared to her taciturn husband, who quietly cooks in the corner. This comparison emphasizes the female protagonist's dominant and active role in her business and personal life, who shows her autonomy and abilities in running the restaurant and defies traditional Confucian views of women as passive and submissive. Li and Zhang (1994) highlighted that the connection between economic reform and women's liberation emerged as a prominent subject in the post-Mao era, with women's employment being a crucial theme reflected in films. Yuyin is a strong-willed woman who aims to earn money to build a new house, and her sociable and hospitable at work delivers her active awareness of achieving personal goals. She is no longer confined to domestic duties but can participate in public life and contribute to society by presenting a new vision of womanhood that is empowered, independent, and capable in the Post-Mao era.

Yuyin is presented as consistently against the 'soft' women image through her decisive resistance against the false accusation from the government and her determination to navigate her turbulent life. After Yuyin and her husband return home from the humiliating movement's assembly, where they were denounced as wealthy enemies of the villagers, her husband struggles with despondency and tries to persuade Yuyin to hand over their savings to the movement's leader. The couple is situated on opposite sides of the frame, with the background of their house visible in a long shot. The light above her highlights Yuyin, while her husband curls up in the corner and is hidden in the darkness (See *Figure 11*). Despite her husband's pleas, Yuyin refuses to succumb to the unjust tactics of the movement and stands up against the false accusation. The distinguished lighting displays the two characters' different inner states in this dilemma. The female protagonist Yuyin, lit from above, appears more decisive and determined than her husband. Yuyin then sits next to her husband, who leans over and self-deprecates, stating that their fate is to live in a hovel. In contrast, Yuyin represents a more indomitable and steadfast character than her husband. She asks him firmly, "What crime have we committed? We wake up early in the morning and work until late every day. We earned money through our industriousness. Whom have we exploited?" Yuyin's words showcase her as a decisive and assertive woman who does not yield to unequal treatment from society. In this shot, Yuyin looks straight ahead while her husband hangs his head and sighs. The disparate reactions of the couple in this political persecution highlight an

apparent comparison between women and men. Women are no longer seen as soft, subordinate roles that are submissive to their male counterparts. Yuyin, in particular, represents women's active self-awareness in the scene as she expresses her opinions bravely and confronts her husband's differing views. She plays the role of the family breadwinner, both mentally and physically, actively encouraging her husband to confront the crime they did not commit. Yuyin's representation shows women in the Post-Mao era seeking personal achievement unrelated to kinship or party affiliation. They actively seek rights in society and are no longer relegated to a subordinate role behind men.



*Figure 11. Yuyin and Her Husband in different lighting*

The film continuously depicts the female protagonist, Yuyin, as a strong-willed woman who bravely defends herself in the face of political persecution and lives her life with steadfastness even while under such persecution. Yuyin and Shutian are publicly tried in front of all villagers on a heavily rainy day due to their secret marriage violating the government's regulations, and a close-up shot shows the couple getting soaked in the heavy rain, their damp hair attached to their faces. The frame shifts to a close-up of Yuyin after Shutian is sentenced to ten years in prison, with Shutian's voice saying: "Be alive, live the same way as animals". Despite being tearful, Yuyin's gaze remains firm and resolute, conveying her tenacity and resilience, creating a meaningful image of a strong-willed woman in a dilemma. Despite the persecution and oppression, Yuyin remains active and brave in her fight for justice and freedom. She continues to hold onto her beliefs and values, even in the face of extreme adversity. The montage that follows the trial scene shows Yuyin doing housework and farm work alone, in different seasons and while pregnant. The film portrays the pathos of a single woman who has lost everything, including her family, due to political movements. However, it also establishes Yuyin's image as a strong-willed woman who is firmly living in the world with her unborn child, and her persistence is precisely her silent act of defiance. Overall, Yuyin's portrayal in the film represents an optimal change towards women in a traditionally patriarchal society, where women are no longer passive followers or traditional moral bearers in both public and familial spheres.

#### 4.4.3 *Woman Demon Human* (1987) Narrative

Qiuyun's parents are travelling performers in a Chinese opera troupe, and as a child, she travelled with them throughout the nation. Qiuyun's status as one of the few girls in the troupe, coupled with her exceptional beauty, renders her a favoured companion among the young boys. She refused to be submissive to the boys, who always chose her as the "wife" role in their games. Instead, she admired the brave and clever main male character, Zhongkui, played by her father in "The Chinese Ghostbuster." When Qiuyun's mother had an affair and left her and her father in the troupe, gossip spread rapidly, and Qiuyun's father could not perform. Qiuyun was subsequently marginalized and bullied by the other children in the troupe. Despite trying to fight back, she was outnumbered and wished for help from Zhongkui, the brave male character in her parents' famous performance.

Qiuyun is passionate about opera and secretly practices singing and dancing daily as a teenager. Her father forbids her from pursuing opera, fearing she will turn out like her mother, who had an affair. However, after substituting for a sick male performer during a show, Qiuyun's talent is discovered by her father, who compromises by allowing her to study opera under the condition of solely acting male characters. She is selected for the village theatrical troupe and later by Mr Zhang, an opera teacher. Qiuyun fell in love with Mr Zhang, her opera teacher in the provincial theatrical troupe, but they kept their distance from each other due to Mr Zhang's married state. Mr Zhang eventually left the troupe when the rumour was raised to defend their innocence and Qiuyun's future, but malevolence towards her continued. Qiuyun leaves the troupe in anger and returns to her hometown. Eventually, with her father's encouragement and support, she returns to the troupe to pursue her dream of becoming an excellent opera performer. She also moves on from her relationship with Mr Zhang to become a professional performer.

Qiuyun is accidentally injured by a spike while performing on stage. Although the troupe consoles her, no one investigates the cause of the deliberate "accident," which triggers traumatic memories of her childhood hopelessness. Despite this, she remains determined to save herself without help and becomes her own Zhongkui to protect herself. After taking a ten-year break from the stage during the Cultural Revolution, Qiuyun gets married and has a child. However, she eventually returns to the stage as Zhongkui's performer and gains a reputation for acting. During her performances, she realizes that she is the one who can redeem herself and discovers the meaning of her life.

#### 4.4.4 Women's Representation in *Woman Demon Human* (1987)

The representation of women in *Woman Demon Human* (1987) is centred around the female protagonist Qiuyun, whose life is driven by her dream of performing opera and her courageous fight against violence to secure her rights as a woman. Qiuyun's portrayal is characterized by a strong female consciousness evident from an early age. As a child, she rejects the traditional role of a submissive wife and instead asserts her dominance over male figures. In one scene, surrounded by young boys playing games, a little boy tries to hold Qiuyun tight, but she decisively declares, "I am nobody's bride," before running away from the chaos. Her rejection of the role of a wife challenges the Confucian principles of women's roles and obligations, which dictate that women should be obedient and submissive to men. By pursuing her own goals and aspirations, Qiuyun embodies a female consciousness that rejects the traditional expectations of women in society. Her words, "I am nobody's bride," demonstrate her agency as an active subject who is aware of her own personal thinking and cognition towards the expectations placed on women in society.



Figure 12. Little Qiuyun: I am Nobody's Bride

Little Qiuyun's brave and strong-willed character embodies an active female consciousness that challenges gender norms prevalent in Chinese society. Despite being ostracized by boys due to her mother's infidelity, Qiuyun refuses to become a victim of unjustified abuse. In one scene, she stands up against a boy who bullies her, wiping away her tears and displaying her independent awareness. However, her bravery ultimately fails in the face of the power dynamic that exists in a patriarchal society. The high-angle shot of Qiuyun lying defenceless on the ground highlights the powerlessness women often experience in male-dominated circumstances (See *Figure 13*). This is further emphasized by the low angle shot of the boys mocking her, reinforcing the gender oppression pervasive in society. Nevertheless, Qiuyun's active female consciousness is not defeated. Her desire for Zhongkui's help represents a desire to break free from the constraints of a patriarchal society and take control of her destiny. This departure from Confucian ideals, which traditionally emphasized obedience and submission for women, paves the way for a more feminist perspective on women's societal roles. Qiuyun's strong-willed character and resistance to gender

oppression serve as a powerful example of the changing attitudes towards women's empowerment in post-Mao China. Her active female consciousness demonstrates the possibility of an alternative path for women's liberation, which challenges traditional gender roles and patriarchal power structures that have long constrained women.



*Figure 13.* Little Qiuyun in Male-dominated Circumstances

The changes in women's inner states as self-reliant individuals with female consciousness are subsequently portrayed through various film techniques used to depict Qiuyun and her inner state during adolescence. Zhongkui appears in Qiuyun's mind after she returns backstage when she gets injured on stage. The shots of Zhongkui walking close to the frame and the opened door backstage cuts back and forth, hinting at the transformation of Qiuyun's inner state. She gradually becomes an independent and decisive person, just like Zhongkui, who can protect herself without relying on men. In a medium shot, Qiuyun is seen looking thoughtfully into the mirror. Suddenly, she puts black and red paint on her face with both hands and screams, releasing her frustration and anger from the rumour and apathy she experienced as a woman. The screaming also expresses the voice of Chinese women who have experienced gender inequality for thousands of years. A long shot shows Qiuyun standing on the table, followed by a close-up shot cut in with a low-angle shot. Her black-painted face contrasts with the white cloth, showing Qiuyun's transformation into a strong and determined person, just like her favourite character Zhongkui through the representation of the colour. The low-angle shot positioned Qiuyun at a higher level above the eye line, making her look more robust and psychologically powerful. The representation of Qiuyun's inner state through the metaphor of Zhongkui's appearances and the camera angles emphasizes that Qiuyun has transformed into an independent and determined individual. She has a female consciousness in defending personal rights and becomes more self-protective and brave in her life. The representation of Qiuyun as a master theatrical performer of Zhongkui also stands against traditional Confucianist ideology towards women. Women in the Post-Mao era seek personal achievement in the public with solid female consciousness, which is decisive and brave

when facing oppression and unequal treatment. The growth of Chinese women's self-consciousness in society is also represented through Qiuyun's transformation.



Figure 14. The Montage showing Qiuyun's Psychological Transformation

In addition, Qiuyun's passion for opera not only served as a creative outlet for her but also exemplified her desire to pursue her interests and ambitions, which were often discouraged for women in traditional Chinese society. By challenging societal norms and pursuing her dreams, Qiuyun represents a powerful woman who believes in gender equality. In the post-Mao era, the focus of women's liberation evolved from advocating for fundamental rights to delving into women's individual awareness, enabling them to explore their identity and origins (Li & Zhang, 1994). As a woman, Qiuyun faced numerous obstacles to becoming an opera performer. She was marginalized and bullied by other children in the troupe and faced opposition from her father, who forbade her from pursuing opera, fearing she would turn out like her mother. Her experiences reflect the obstacles, stereotypes, and oppression women face in Chinese society. However, she persisted and eventually gained recognition for her talent. Through her determination to succeed in a male-dominated field, Qiuyun demonstrated her belief in gender equality. Her excellent portrayal of the male character Zhongkui on stage challenged the notion that men dominated the world and presented a brave and determined image of women.

#### 4.4.5 Theme analysis -- Gender relations

In the Post-Mao era, women sought equal rights in society, particularly in their professions, illustrated in films. Women's relatively equal rights and opportunities in society are highlighted in these films, with the most notable improvement being the representation of women in various professional fields. Women no longer play minor roles oppressed by men in their professions. Instead, female protagonists in the post-Mao era exhibit dominance and proficiency in their respective fields. *Hibiscus Town* (1986) features Yuyin Li, a small business entrepreneur who runs her bean curd soup business with her husband. According to Confucian gender ideology, the husband is the primary figure who controls his wife as a master in the domestic and public spheres. However, in their small business, Yuyin and her husband represent a completely different image from traditional gender relations. Yuyin plays the leading role in the outer sphere, owns the business, and is the central figure in the bean curd soup-making process. Yuyin's dominance over her husband in the business is depicted in the opening scene of bean curd soup preparation and

selling. This representation breaks the male-dominant image in the occupation and public sphere and goes against the patriarchal order. It reflects the enhancement of women integrated into patriarchal society and alters their social status.

In *Woman Demon Human* (1987), Qiu Yun's success in her opera performance as a male character is evidence that women in the Post-Mao era maintained relatively equal rights to men in diverse occupations and could do a better job than men. The theatrical troupe, which Qiu Yun stays in during childhood, has more boys than girls. However, Qiu Yun was chosen by the troupe manager to be the substitute for the male protagonist, which shows her ability in opera performance, which is greater than boys of the same age. In the film's finale, Qiu Yun ultimately has the opportunity to perform overseas as the male character Zhongkui due to her excellent performing skills. This demonstrates women's capability and success in the outer sphere of domesticity. Qiu Yun's mastery of male roles in opera performances serves as a metaphor, hinting that women who have entered men's fields and are successful in the outer sphere are also praised by society, reflected in the films.

In the previous Mao era, the political sphere was an important arena where gender equality was promoted. Female protagonists such as Daojing Lin in *Song of Youth* (1959) and Qionghua Wu in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961) appeared in the public sphere as loyal Chinese female communists, fighting fearlessly at the front lines of the national revolution. However, their depiction in the public sphere was heavily politicized, tying their self-achievement and self-value solely to the political purpose. This portrayal limited the representation of equal gender relations to the political context, and their roles seemed to be unitized and idealized. The idealized gender relation in the Mao era was a vital propaganda tool to promote Maoist feminism, where the centralized government created an illusion of gender harmony to control the population. However, in the Post-Mao era, female characters in films such as *Hibiscus Town* (1986) and *Woman Demon Human* (1987) were depicted as real people who think and act for themselves, not just for the party's interests. The female protagonists' passion for their professions and belief in their capabilities were on full display, proving that women were just as capable as men. The quality of equal rights and opportunities for women in society became more diverse in the Post-Mao era, not limited to just serving the Communist Party.

In the Post-Mao era, the portrayal of women in romantic relationships became dominant, as evidenced by Yuyin's two marriages in *Hibiscus Town* (1986). Yuyin's first husband tried to persuade her to give up their bean curd soup business after being accused of being an enemy of the proletariat. However, Yuyin insisted on their innocence. Her husband responded, "You are in charge of this family, and I will do whatever you say." This statement broke the traditional gender hierarchy of male superiority and female inferiority, enhancing Yuyin's dominance in the

romantic relationship as a woman. Moreover, Yuyin's relationship with her second husband showed the cultural and social changes after the Mao era. When the re-opened bean curd soup restaurant became popular and drew crowds of customers, the husband replied to a customer's praise of the soup's flavour by saying, "I was trained by my wife, the master, in making the bean curd soup." This response reflected a changed psychological perspective towards the privileged man's power in the family, specifically the husband and father. Women's devotion to the family and the business were no longer attributed to males, who had been considered appendages to men. The husband showed respect and admiration toward his wife and her capabilities, eradicating patriarchal dominance within the domestic sphere.

The portrayal of Qiuyun and Mr Zhang's relationship in *Woman Demon Human* (1987) highlights the positive impact of Women's studies and Chinese feminism on women's romantic relationships. Mr Zhang's respect for Qiuyun's talent in opera and his decision to leave the opera troupe for her better future challenge patriarchal traditions that restrict women's power socially and economically. Qiuyun's rejection of the traditional female roles in favour of pursuing personal achievement on stage demonstrates the shift in women's awareness towards self-fulfilment., which reflects women's devotion to the family was no longer considered a duty but rather respected and praised by men. Women could even take on the dominant role in familial construction and achieve independence mentally and economically. It stands in contrast to the previous era of Mao, where the emphasis was on women's political drives in the national revolution, and women's independence was primarily shown in the political sphere.

In the Mao era, women who challenged the traditional role of wife and mother were often depicted in propaganda as heroic figures fighting against the class struggle with the Chinese Communist Party. Daojing Lin in *Song of Youth* (1959) is an example of a woman who pursued a free marriage and filed for divorce due to political differences with her husband. However, these portrayals often focused on women's political achievements and ignored their personal aspirations in contrast to the Post-Mao era, with a shift in focus towards women's personal achievements and self-value. The gender relations in the Post-Mao era also differed from those in the Mao era in that they shifted from a collective sense of gender to an individualist one. The focus was no longer on women as loyal followers of the Chinese Communist Party fighting against class struggle but on individual women pursuing their aspirations and goals. Overall, the shift in focus from political to personal achievement in the Post-Mao era allowed for a more nuanced understanding of women's roles in society and greater freedom and agency for individual women in gender relations and their pursuit of happiness and fulfilment.

#### 4.5 Post-2000 Era

The Chinese television industry during the Post-Mao era rapidly developed and became a foremost entertainment in China. Meanwhile, the feminist topic has become popular in film and television and widely sparked public concerns about gender relations in China. *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019) is based on the rising gender topic that reflects the underlying gender oppression toward highly- educated independent women, which implies independent women's dilemma in the patriarchal society. *Nothing but Thirty* (2020) is one of the most popular female-centric dramas that focuses on three women with different personalities and experiences, showing the increase of women's female consciousness in the Post-Mao era. However, female-centric movies and dramas also portray the gender conflicts that arise in contemporary society, leading to misunderstandings and stereotypes toward both genders.

#### 4.5.1 *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019) Narrative

Nan Sheng, a single female journalist in her thirties, is diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Her dysfunctional family is struggling financially, and her father is having an affair with her former classmate. To raise money for her surgery, Nan is forced to take on a biography project for an arrogant, wealthy entrepreneur's father, Mr Li, recommended by a male colleague. Nan's lonely middle-aged housewife mother joins her journey to meet the entrepreneur's father. They encounter Guangming Liu, a kind-hearted man who offers help to an older woman in need at the pier. Although Nan initially dismisses Guangming's interference, she develops feelings for him.

Mr Li is a kind-hearted person who discovers Nan's illness, and he also hits it off with Nan's mother. However, his son, the entrepreneur, is grumpy and disrespects Nan's identity as a female journalist. Nan quits the job angrily and discovers in shock that her mother and the entrepreneur's father are having an affair. Despite her parents' behaviour, Nan meets Guangming Liu by chance when she tries to commit suicide due to her helplessness. She develops romantic feelings for him and invites him to have sex, but he is frightened by her cancer confession and runs away. After arguing with her mother, Nan eventually returns to the biography project for financial gain. She accidentally meets Guangming Liu at the entrepreneur's house and learns that he is a low-status matrilocal son-in-law of the entrepreneur. Guangming disappoints her but gives her the courage to give him a forced kiss before ending the romantic feeling.

Mr Li passes away; Nan swaps her male colleague's suit for Mr Li's funeral for a pink one. The prank led the colleague to be blamed and expelled by Li's family. In retaliation, the colleague forces Nan to have sexual intercourse with him. Nan, feeling helpless and disrespected by society, accepts but ends up feeling sexually unsatisfied. After all the things led by ovarian cancer Nan Sheng has been through, she travels back to Mountain Yun alone. She realises in the end that self-respect and self-regard are more critical for her living in society, which supports her in life.

#### 4.5.2 Women's Representation in *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019)

The women's representation in *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019) centres on the female protagonist Nan Sheng, an awakening independent woman with female self-consciousness and autonomously thinking, which is reflected in the portrayal of her and her attitude toward herself as a woman in the journey of raising money for surgery. The portrayal of Nan Sheng in the film demonstrates a different image from Chinese Confucian women physically and mentally, which illustrates the optimal influences of Feminism in the post-2000 era through the transformation of the independent, well-educated woman.

The opening scene of *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019) establishes an impressive image of the female protagonist Nan is an independent and dynamic female journalist. The film starts with a shot showing the mountain fire; then Nan Sheng appears in the frame and investigates the mountain fire alone for first-hand information. A medium shot shows Nan carrying a big backpack with a camera holding her hand in an all-black outfit (See *Figure.15*). The shots continuously show Nan climbing up to the Mountain and detailed recording clues by using her camera. Her appearance violates the normative ideal of the traditional 'soft' Chinese woman but depicts a passionate and ambitious woman in her occupation. The scene ends with a long shot showing Nan standing at the top of the mountain while discovering the arson reality of the mountain fire; then, she refuses to report the entrepreneur Li as the hero in firefighting due to his exaggerated testimony to serve his own purposes. A confident and righteous woman figure firstly represents the audience who holds her values and perspective toward the job of journalism and society. She is an active information producer, disciplined and reliable in her occupation, with independent thinking.



*Figure 15.* Nan Sheng Investigates the Mountain Fire

Furthermore, Nan Sheng actively confronts the attitude of irreverence towards women in her workplace by defending herself against men's disrespect towards her during her first meeting with Entrepreneur Li. Entrepreneur Li arranged the meeting at an outdoor bath in Mountain Yun, where

Nan, the only woman in the scene, stood outside waiting for the men in the bath. Entrepreneur Li comes out from the tub to meet Nan wearing only a bathrobe covering his lower body, showing his disrespect towards Nan. This scene depicts explicit gender oppression and discrimination towards women, yet Nan Sheng, a woman from the post-2000 generation, does not passively endure the hostility from the patriarchal society. She rejects the contract and even rips it up after being ridiculed by the Entrepreneur to express her anger and resist this gender-discriminated cooperation.

In the shot of the argument (See Figure 16), the director places the two characters, Nan Sheng and Entrepreneur Li, on both sides in symmetrical but different backgrounds of bright and dark. The woman theatrically puts the bright side and looks directly at the madman fearlessly, which implies the rise of feminist concepts in Chinese women of the new generation, who are brave and consistent when facing their rights being violated by others. Despite financial difficulties, Nan Sheng neither gives up her dignity for money nor shrinks back when experiencing patriarchal oppression. The portrayal of Nan Sheng decisively fighting back against gender oppression and disrespect shows women's resistance to female self-consciousness in the post-2000 era.



Figure 16. Argument between Nan Sheng and Entrepreneur Li

Moreover, Nan Sheng is not ashamed to express her sexual desire as a woman, which violates the conservative image of women in traditional Chinese society. Sexuality is usually an awkward and shameful topic in conservative Chinese culture, especially for women, due to the Confucian idea of Feminine Conduct of the Four Feminine Virtues. In the film's finale, Nan Sheng finally has sexual intercourse with her colleague for her sexual desire before the surgery. The representation of Nan in the intimate scene (See Figure 17) is hard to identify as sexploitation of women but tends to represent her dominance in sexual intercourse. Nan is in a black tank with her upper body covered except her arm with gloomy lighting that barely sees her body. The scene shows her desire to dominate sexuality; the camera does not focus on any detail of her body as an object but shows her movement attempting to lead the activity. The female protagonist in the intimate scene

is shown with less of her body visible, indicating that the scene is not catering to the male gaze and is attempting to avoid objectifying women. It expresses the female character's right to freely express her sexual desire without reducing her to a mere object of desire for male viewers. This suggests Nan Sheng is an independent woman with the autonomy and freedom to externalize their active thinking, which stands out of the traditional gender concepts and eliminates those 'shames' on the woman of the patriarchal society.



*Figure 17.* The Female Protagonist Nan during Intimate Scene

#### 4.5.3 *Nothing but Thirty* (2020) Narrative

*Nothing but Thirty* (2020) features Jia Gu, Manni Wang, and Xiaoqin Zhong as the three main female protagonists, who, despite their different backgrounds and experiences, become close friends while living in Shanghai. Throughout the series, they each face unique challenges and frustrations related to family, marriage, and business as they navigate their thirties. However, as the drama progresses, they all grow to become confident and independent women.

Jia Gu is the wealthiest and most affluent of the three female protagonists, with a husband who serves as the CEO of a firework company. Gu is an astute and forceful woman who excels in business and is sensitive to the needs of her family. Her husband owes much of his success to her support during the company's initial start-up phase. Although she becomes a caregiver upon returning home, she remains a capable and assertive woman, fighting for her husband and son. To expand her husband's business network, Gu works tirelessly to integrate with a group of wealthy women from high society, enduring initial scorn. However, her kindness and abilities eventually allow her to join the group and benefit her husband's business. Despite her dedication to her family and her husband's business, her husband has an affair with a young woman from their company, causing the relationship to collapse. Gu's husband's mistake in storing fireworks leads to a severe explosion, resulting in his imprisonment. Gu sells all of their assets to pay for his error, and although her husband tries to save their marriage, Gu chooses to divorce him and start a new life with their young son outside of Shanghai.

Manni Wang leaves her hometown to pursue her dreams in Shanghai, where she works as a salesperson in a luxury store. Despite immense competition and pressure, she remains kind and hardworking, never profiling or discriminating against customers. On a cruise vacation, Manni meets Zhengxian Liang, a wealthy young man from Hong Kong. They spend a joyful time together, but Manni knows their different worlds and refuses Liang's invitation to travel together. However, Liang's ardent pursuit eventually leads Manni to fall in love with him, and he settles down in Shanghai for her. Manni later discovers that Liang has a fiancée in Hong Kong and cannot accept such a flawed relationship. She returns to her hometown and finds a new job to start a new life, but she is haunted by gossip from her relatives and neighbours about her unmarried status. Eventually, Manni returns to Shanghai to seek more opportunities and study abroad to develop herself and explore a meaningful life.

Xiaoqin Zhong is a kind and innocent woman from Shanghai who does not experience much living pressure, as her parents live nearby and can often lend her a hand. However, her marriage with Yu Chen, an honest and stubborn man, lacks passion. She married him due to traditional beliefs that women should marry before thirty. When she has a miscarriage, she discovers her husband's lack of care for her and files for divorce. Xiaoqin starts dating a younger man from work but realizes she still has feelings for her ex-husband. Meanwhile, Yu Chen reflects on his past behaviours and realizes his affection for her. They remarry after going through challenges together. Xiaoqin resigns from her job and focuses on writing, gaining fame and high royalties through her online fiction.

#### 4.5.4 Women's Representation in *Nothing but Thirty* (2020)

The women's representation in the television drama *Nothing but Thirty* (2020) is primarily surrounded by the three female protagonists: Jia Gu, Manni Wang, and Xiaoqin Zhong, who represents how feminism has been blended with Confucianism in contemporary China which women with different familial and social background can live as wise, independent and powerful women who show the women's active female self-consciousness and self-confidence in various roles in the inner and outer sphere of the Yin-yang binary.

Jia Gu, in the drama, represents a new image of kinship roles: mother and wife in the twenty-first century who is not a traditional Confucian woman figure who is passive and affiliated to the men, neither husband nor son without unconditional following. The representation of awakening self-awareness as a new housewife, an inner role figure in the post-2000 era, conveys a novel feminist ideology that women in the new generation of China can balance their status in the domestic and public sphere. The non-traditional wife, or housewife, represents Gu's ability to deal with the

financial issues of her husband's business. At the begging of the drama, the firework company struggles to maintain the capital chain due to the deferred payment from a client. After Huanshan Xu, who is Jia's husband, receives a phone call from the accountant about the capital chain issue, Huanshan requires Jia to go with him to the company to deal with the matter. The setting of the wife who is capable of helping the husband approach the problems from the outer sphere is firstly challenging the Confucian gender ideology that the wife is placing at a comparatively equal status as the man, which is against the image of male's appendix but plays as a policymaker in the relationship with the husband and even extended to the public sphere. In the following company scene, where the accountant stands at the right side of the frame, Huanshan, the husband, comes out from the elevator from the left, and then the wife, Jia, follows him. In the frame, Huanshan and the male accountant face directly to the camera, where Jia sets behind them in the middle. The triangle position of the three characters seemingly conveys the husband's dominance in the outer sphere of business. Still, the message of a dominant and wise woman then shows through the next medium shot (see *Figure 18*). In the medium shot, the delicate relationship represents that the husband on the left is stony-faced and looks down at the floor, compared to her wife, who smiles calmly and patiently. The accountant turns to Jia for resolution at the end of the discussion. Jia's attitude is utterly different from her husband, who confidently undertakes the delicate issue and then appeases her disgruntled husband. The representation of Jia expresses an entirely different image of stereotyped emotional and soft women in traditional gender concepts; she not only represents a wise and decisive woman in both the domestic and public sphere but also hints at her leading status in the relationship. Moreover, her reaction to the crisis contrasts with her husband, whom an active and assertive woman represents, even though she chooses to be a nurturing figure—a housewife.



*Figure 18.* The Triangle positions of Jia Gu's Couple and the accountant

There is also a meaningful shot set followed by technically implicit the wise and decisive housewife dominant in the relationship with her husband and business. After Jia enters her

husband's office, she calls the client, and the reflection shot of her shadow stands out in the background of the staff office full of employees (see *figure 19*). The shot explicitly shows Jia's capability of solving business issues whose behaviour relates to the consequence of not only the business but all the employees in the company. It also implies Jia, as a well-educated independent woman in the post-2000 era, is actively changing the Confucian inferior woman status through her confident, wise, and active female consciousness.



*Figure 19.* The reflection of Jia Gu through the Company's window

Manni Wang, in the drama, represents an ordinary Chinese woman in the post-2000 who who migrated to Shanghai alone from a small city as a Shanghai drifter (沪漂) to seek better opportunities and a future but ultimately became a 'wave slaves' working day and night for a meagre salary. Even facing living pressures, she is consistent in the belief that a woman can pursue personal value and achieve self-fulfilment without being dependent on men through the scene where she encounters a wealthy young man on a cruise. After Manni spends a couple of fabulous days with Liang on the cruise, the affluent man Liang invites Manni to join his journey to Iceland to see aurora on the final day of the cruise tourism. In the scene, Manni is no longer in a gorgeous dress as in previous days on the cruise. Instead, she is in a plain white t-shirt which shows her intention of terminating the splendid life on the cruise. She returns to the reality of an 'ordinary' woman persevering and diligent in work and life for a self-creating better future Liang persuades Manni to stay with him, consequently, lives a wonderful fairy-tale life without financial pressure; meanwhile, the blurred background also creates a dreamy atmosphere in that Manni is sinking. However, Manni consistently presents as an awakening, self-conscious woman who firmly rejects the delusive fairy tale. As Manni says: 'I do not belong to the luxury life on the cruise. The dream is over when the cruise docks; then I should go back to my real life.' Manni's words indicate her strong- will for women's autonomy and independence, who sees the woman herself as an

independent subject in society with a strong desire for self-improvement and self-value seeking in society.



*Figure 20.* Manni rejects the wealthy man Liang's Invitation of Traveling

Moreover, Manni's strong will and consideration also show in her decision to study abroad for self-improvement in her thirties after success in her occupation and being promoted by the boss, the store manager in Shanghai. In the dialogue between Manni and her boss, Manni admits that she realises she has never seen the world, so her eyes are not wide open. Even though she is in her thirties with the marriage pressures from her parents, she decisively chooses to study abroad to broaden her horizon. Her decision shows that women in the post-2000 era hold autonomy in their lives and are positive and courageous in seeking personal value. Moreover, Manni's image also breaks a traditional Chinese ideology toward the woman who strongly associates with different familial male roles—father, husband, and son at various stages of life. Manni's image at the end of the drama at the airport also represents a confident woman image (See *Figure 21*) In the shot, Manni stands out from the blurred background with a side light from the left shining on her hair in medium shot whose head is slightly up and looking beyond the frame. A confident and beautiful woman figure represents through the picture, but her beauty is no longer linked to pleasing male audiences. Her beauty comes from her life confidence and courage to discover the world in her thirties. She is a model for many young Chinese women who do not stop seeking female self-consciousness and independence at any stage of life.



*Figure 21.* Manni at the airport for studying aboard

Xiaoqin Zhong, the relatively innocent and ordinary woman among the three protagonists, is represented as slightly obedient to her parents. Despite this, she consistently defends her rights and is free to express her attitude in the marriage; moreover, she keeps seeking self-fulfilment through writing. Xiaoqin, at the beginning of the drama, represents the moderately submissive daughter who married a man introduced by her parents; however, she is consistent in her active female awareness in the marriage and chooses to divorce when feeling disrespected by her husband. For example, Xiaoqin often being 'brain-washing' by her parents that an over-thirties woman must marry a man; otherwise, she will be a poor and lonely woman when she gets old, which is a through that full of traditional gender ideology de-valuing women. Xiaoqin rejects this prejudiced message and is consistent in her idea that women in the post-2000 era could well-living in society without depending on men. She files for divorce when she realises the divergent family values between her husband and her after the accident abortion is also an example showing her active female self-consciousness. Xiaoqin holds independent thinking as a female subject when disagreeing with others and is consistent in her opinion, and she does not submissively follow all her husband's words. She is not portrayed as an appendix to the man but as seeking gender equality and balance in the marriage that violated the traditional woman figure to safeguard the patriarchal social order.

Moreover, Xiaoqin's success in her fiction writing as an internet writer is another example of an independent woman who seeks self-fulfilment through her interests. After the divorce, Xiaoqin still maintains an optimal attitude in her life and redirects her focus to novel writing on the internet. She is constructed as a self-motivated woman by the feminist ideology in the post-2000 era who perceives self-achievement as the centre of life and does not follow the rules of Chinese Confucian society. Moreover, her success in the drama's finale as a famous writer on the internet also represents her capability as an independent woman in her fascinating occupation, which shows her denial of being a submissive housewife and seeking personal gain to fulfil her life as a woman.

#### 4.5.5 Theme analysis -- Gender relations

Feminism has seeped into the Chinese society of the post-2000 era; women have become more independent in society and represent diverse occupations which is reflected in the female protagonists in the film *Send Me to the Cloud* (2019) and television drama *Nothing but Thirty* (2020). Even though the character Jia Gu in *Nothing but Thirty* (2020) is a housewife who takes a back seat and becomes the role of nurturing, she is still autonomous in her marriage. She maintains dominance in the family as well as in society. However, discrimination toward the female gender is still evident during the increasing feminist concepts

among the new Chinese generation, which meanwhile reflects that society is underlyingly patriarchal.

Firstly, society defines a woman's value as an associate with the man she married, not the woman herself, which reflects the terminology 'Left-over women'. The terminology appears under the patriarchal concept in the post-2000 era that describes, meanwhile belittles, women over twenty-seven still unmarried. The film *Send Me to the Cloud* (2019) points out the gender oppression and double standard toward women through a scene where the female protagonist Nan Sheng hears a conversation of 'left-over women' between a young couple at the subway station. The couple read an official report on Language and Living Conditions in 2007 China that the age of twenty-seven is the cut-off point before any single woman is classified as 'left-over'. However, the classification does not restrict men; a widespread Chinese local saying, 'Men are always bachelors in their prime,' shows the unidirectional gender oppression toward women. Nan Sheng, the socially identified 'left-over woman', also faces oppression from society even though she is highly educated and independent. Her mother often talks incessantly about her unmarried status and complains that her high academic qualification does not benefit her in a romantic relationship and marriage. Women's achievements do not be praised and mentioned by society; instead, staying single in their thirties becomes evidence of the failure of women verified by the patriarchal society.

Manni Wang in *Nothing but Thirty* (2020) also faces the same plight even though she is a motivated woman living independently in Shanghai, far away from her hometown. Manni often receives phone calls from her parents, who urge her to get married on blind dates because society firmly convinces her that women would gradually 'drop in price' with age increasing. Moreover, the elders frequently compare the capability and background of each young women's husband and praise the one who married a capable and wealthy man. Under the social environment, the women of the young generation are still underlyingly devastated by the traditional Confucian gender ideology even though they hold active female consciousness, but difficult to change the whole society.

Secondly, there is a substantial female generation gap between women from the first decade of China's One Child Policy and their mothers. Women of the new generation have a massive conflict with their relatively traditional mothers about gender ideologies; the elders are interdependent in the relationships and tend to rely on the men and despise women's independence and capability based on Confucian gender ideology. For example, Xiaoqin Zhong in *Nothing but Thirty* (2020) has a fierce quarrel with her mother when she files for divorce after her accidental abortion. The young woman insists that women could also live a better life without marriage but is turned down by her mother. The mother blames her celibatarian and asserts the

ideology is a 'poison' promoted in the contemporary cyber society toward women. 'Why do you not get married while everyone is married? The mother questions Xiaoqin, 'How lonely will you be when you are getting old but still celibate'. The argument between Xiaoqin and her mother reflects the massive gap in gender awareness between the two generations the older generation, who were born in the Mao era, still maintains a traditional gender ideology that glorifies the women's virtues as passive kinship-role of Confucianism. The generation gap is difficult to overcome due to the distinct growing environment between the generations; therefore, patriarchal oppression comes not only from men but also from women.

The Female generation gap also represents by Nan Sheng in *Send Me to the Cloud* (2019), who has a divergent gender consciousness with her mother, which is reflected in the bus scene when they travel to Mountain Yun. Nan Sheng's behaviour of putting a bag of fruits in the overhead compartment by herself was blamed by her mother as the reason for her cannot find a boyfriend. 'You should find a manly boy to help you lift it. Do not be too tough.' The mother accuses Nan while putting red lipstick on. The attitude toward the behaviour of lifting the bag in public also implicit the numerous divergences between women from different generations. As an independent woman of the new generation, Nan does not rely on men physically and mentally in her life who represent women's equal capability with men. However, the mother tends to portray women's 'soft' based on the Confucian gender ideology to stimulate men's protection of women and then rely on men. The different perspectives of the mother-daughter show reality that the increasing feminism in contemporary China is fragmented, that people from different generations have distinguished gender perspectives facilitating the patriarchal oppression toward women of the new generation. Compared to the previous era of the Post-Mao, there are more details and clues of the societal truth on gender relations shown in films and television. The female protagonists from both Post-Mao and Post-2000 eras represent the increasing female consciousness through their active autonomy in the inner and outer sphere of the Yin-yang binary, but the films and television of the Post-2000 reflect more latent obstacles in women's liberation.

Lastly, gender conflicts and the impact of feminism has entered contemporary China and is represented in the large numbers of female-centric movies and powerful female-centric dramas springing up in the Chinese film and television industry. The aggravation of gender conflicts primarily caused by the mutual incomprehension between genders in Chinese society and the rise of radical feminism, which is reflected in the portrayal of men in movies and television. For example, male characters, either Nan's father or other men in the movie *Send Me to the Cloud* (2019), are arrogant but ordinary. Nan's father has an affair with Nan's classmate, who betrayed his marriage but ultimately became bankrupt due to his conditioning following his mistress in the business. The entrepreneur Li also be depicted as an ignorant and under-educated moneybag who is rude and disrespectful toward women. Even Guangming Liu, with whom Nan

Sheng has certain feelings, is depicted as a kept man who relies on his wealthy girlfriend's financial support. The portrayal of the men creates gender conflicts in the film, benefiting the female protagonist image in the female-centric story. Meanwhile, it also reinforces the gender stereotypes toward men as hypersexuality and aggression for advocating women's independence.

Male characters also are vilified to a certain extent in *Nothing but Thirty* (2020) to glorify women's capabilities and cater to the target audience-- females. The case of male cheating on his wife also represents in the storyline of female protagonists Jia Gu and Manni Wang. Jia Gu's husband has an affair with a young woman he met in the business; even Jia is a capable and nurturing wife. Moreover, the wealthy young man Liang, who is pursuing Manni, is also a two-timer dating multiple women simultaneously. The overstates of male hypersexuality become a stunt in movies and television that highlights women's innocence, gradually becoming a reason for promoting feminism in the Post-2000 era. However, the dramatic effect of representing gender conflicts in films and television intensify gender stereotype toward men, then strengthening the sexist attitudes of both gender and feminazi in Chinese society.

In conclusion, feminism has infiltrated Chinese Confucian society in that women from the new generation are mostly represented as highly educated and independent and hold active female self-consciousness in seeking equal rights and personal achievement. However, society is fragmented, and women from different generations hold different perspectives toward feminism and gender relations that somehow reinforce the patriarchal society. Men in the Post-2000 era are mistakenly placed as the opposite female gender who are portrayed as the barrier to women's liberation. The tense relations between gender also questions the future of Chinese feminism.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

#### 5.1 Introduction

This research set out to examine the shift in representation of women and gender relations under the influence of traditional Confucianism and feminism, in Chinese female-centred films and television of four different eras— Republican, Mao, Post-Mao, and Post-2000, which are from the early twentieth century until the present. The two research questions: "How are the Chinese women portrayed in the Chinese films or television of the era?" and "How do the women figures support or go against Confucianism and feminism over each era of Republican, Mao, Post-Mao, and Post-2000?" guided the research. The textual analysis of the texts identified different female representation and gender relations of the four research eras. The purpose of the thesis was to examine the representation of Chinese women in a socio-cultural context, and the history of Chinese society that changed with optimal changes and improvements to the traditionally passive gender—women and how women became more aware of becoming empowered.

The topic area of women's representation including gender oppression and patriarchy in China cannot be separated from the traditional belief system and philosophy—Confucianism which sets the rules and morals for women to stay within the inner area of the household (Rosenlee, 2006; Nuyen, 2010). In the eight examples, the social contexts reflect the appalling gender oppression toward women experienced in those time period and that woman had been signified as an object, othered, and even presented as appendants to men. This was most noticeably seen in the early eras of the Republican and early Mao era. The dictatorship also impacted gender issues in China since the Mao era, which interconnected with the government's advocacy for women's liberation and Chinese feminism. Gilmartin (1993) proposed that the Chinese gender system and Chinese feminism were re-constructed in the power structure of the Chinese Communist Party since the Chinese Communist leader Mao founded the People's Republic of China in 1949. Even though women had become relatively equal to men in public during the advocacy of women's liberation by the Chinese Communist Party, women were still present under the Communist Party and male leaders' privilege. Women's feminist awareness was raised in the post-Mao era due to the formal establishment of women's academic discipline (Li & Zhang, 1994); consequently, women have become more independent and active in pursuing gender equality in a patriarchal society. Despite progress, gender inequality persists, particularly in unequal pay, reproduction rights, and sexual violence; and there is still a long way to achieve gender equality.

The concepts and theories of Confucianism and feminism are the basis for arriving at the findings. The research demonstrated that Confucian concepts shape gender cognition and reinforce unequal

gender rights in Chinese society, as depicted in all seven films and one television series. All the sample often explicit Confucian gender concepts include emphasising women's familial obligation, moral virtues of being loyal to men in women's life span, and women's inferior status in the patriarchal familial system. The research shows the increasing in women's social status that women's self-definition was no longer solely associated with the patriarchal family; meanwhile, female characters were represented seeking sexual and gender equality and were vividly present in the films and television series of the Post-Mao and Post-2000 eras.

### 5.2.1 Summary of key findings in *The Goddess* (1934) and *New Women* (1935) of the Republican era

The films of the Republican era depict female protagonists in two ways: women seeking independence and devoted mothers adhering to traditional kinship roles. These two images reflect both Western feminist ideologies and Chinese society's values. The new woman figure encourages women to leave the traditional confines of their homes and pursue their societal goals. For example, the nameless mother in *The Goddess* (1934) is a single mother raising her son in Shanghai through hard work and determination. Wei Ming in *New Women* (1935) is also a new woman figure who seeks financial independence through her work as a teacher and her aspiration to become a writer. Both characters challenge the traditional binary of *nei-wai* and seek independence in the public sphere.

At the same time, the films also highlight the importance of traditional motherhood, portraying mothers willing to sacrifice everything, including their bodies, for their children. The nameless mother in *The Goddess* (1934) and Wei Ming in *New Women* (1935) are forced to become prostitutes to support their children. While the devoted mother figure aligns with traditional Chinese female roles, it also deviates from feminism as forced to objectify themselves. Nevertheless, the devoted mother figures in both films also reflect the unbalanced social relations of the time. Women had limited opportunities and rights to pursue their goals and independence, and men took the initiative in society.

### 5.2.2 Summary of key findings in *Song of Youth* (1959) and *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961) of the Mao era

The representation of women in Mao-era films reflects the gradual increase in feminism and the push for improved social status for women. Female warriors and revolutionary figures, who are decisive and determined in their revolutionary journey, are prominent in these films. For instance, Daojing Lin in *Song of Youth* (1959) is a brave and assertive female revolutionary who seeks social independence and actively participates in Communist movements to uphold her political beliefs. She is not afraid to speak her mind, breaking away from traditional passive roles expected

of women in her interactions with her husband and society. She holds onto her desire for independence in society and initiates a divorce when her political opinions diverge from her husband's. Similarly, Qionghua in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961) represents a strong female warrior who bravely fights against class struggles alongside the Chinese Communist Party and eventually becomes the leader of the women's detachment. She remains determined to fight against class struggles, even in a brutal and harsh environment. Both female protagonists challenge the traditional image of soft and passive women, instead portraying active and decisive figures in their political journeys.

Despite their strength and independence, the female warrior image in these films still reflects a certain degree of psychological passivity, as these women are depicted as daughters of the Chinese Communist Party who follow the party's lead. The reasons for Daojing's decisive following of the CCP and her desire to become a communist member remain unknown, as her knowledge about the communist revolution and her desire to join are solely derived from the speeches of male communist Jiachuan Lu. The women's unconditional following of the CCP is also apparent in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961), as all female soldiers follow the CCP's rule and fight for social class without necessarily understanding the implications of their actions. A male communist tells Qionghua to prioritize the party's collective goal and follow its rules, reinforcing the image of women as passive daughters of the CCP. Thus, the representation of women in these films is ambiguous - while women participate in the workplace and political sphere in large numbers, they do so passively and unconditionally follow the party's words. Their desire for personal fulfilment is solely expressed in the context of the Communist revolution.

### 5.2.3 Summary of key findings in *Hibiscus Town* (1986) and *Woman Demon Human* (1987) of the Post-Mao era

A significant increase in female awareness among women is evident in their representation in post-Mao era films. Women display a strong-willed desire to achieve self-independence and personal goals that are no longer associated with the Chinese Communist Party or the collective. Additionally, women are shown to be as capable as men, highlighting women's power and capability. In the film *Hibiscus Town* (1986), Yuyin, an entrepreneur of a bean curd soup restaurant, is portrayed as a diligent and intelligent woman through scenes of her preparing bean curd in the early morning and interacting with customers. Yuyin's enthusiasm and hospitality have helped her business thrive, reinforcing her image as an independent and capable woman. Moreover, Yuyin dominates her relationship with her husband, who is willing to follow her lead, abandoning the traditional housewife role of dependence and passivity. Yuyin's image supports the rise of feminism in the post-Mao era and women's awakening self-awareness.

An increase in women's awareness is also apparent in the film *Woman Demon Human* (1987), which depicts the female protagonist Qiuyun as a determined woman who refuses to become a passive wife and instead pursues her dream of becoming an excellent Chinese opera performer in male roles. Qiuyun's rejection of traditional passive roles is reflected in her childhood when she tells her male childhood friends that she will not be anyone's wife. Throughout the film, she remains determined to pursue her passion for opera performing, and her character transformation through the opera character Zhongkui showcases her inner strength and independence. Qiuyun's representation reflects the rise of feminism in the post-Mao era, highlighting the importance of women's self-awareness and receiving respect from men in pursuing their goals.

#### 5.2.4 Summary of key findings in *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019) and *Nothing but Thirty* (2020) of the Post-2000 eras

The representation of women in the post-2000 era is more diverse and vivid in exploring feminism. There are more real gender issues in contemporary society that have been discovered through post-2000 films and television shows. Furthermore, women's image is not limited to showing their personal fulfilment but also their desire and perception to fight against gender oppression and sexism, originating from traditional Confucianist gender ideologies. For example, the female protagonist Nan Sheng in *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019) represents her strong will to fight against traditional passive women's roles and gender oppression. Her single status puts her under pressure from her parents, who believe that women should get married before their late twenties; otherwise, they will be defined as "leftover women" by society. Despite this, Nan Sheng does not yield to gender oppression and immerses herself in her work as a journalist who supports herself and bravely faces challenges in her life.

The three female protagonists represent dynamic and active womanhood in *Nothing but Thirty* (2020). Jia Gu, a housewife, does not follow the traditional passive wife image as she is wise and valiant in business and interpersonal relations. She supports her husband and son and creates a better life for them. Moreover, the female protagonist Manni Wang Xiaoqin Zhong shows women's desire to seek autonomy in public and fulfil personal achievement through self-improvement. The finale of Manni studying abroad to improve herself and Xiaoqin becoming a famous internet writer reflects the increasing feminism in China as women deny being passive and have the chance to support themselves and fulfil personal desires.

### 5.3 Chinese women's Rejection of being the 'other'

Women in Chinese cinema and other 'non-Western' studies are regularly placed at the 'periphery' based on the traditional cultural essence that has depicted women as the other (Wang, 2011, p.2). Chinese women were historically and traditionally identified as the other, who are trapped within

the household, without opportunities and even rights to emerging into society (Rosenlee, 2006). While watching Chinese female-centred films, the patriarchal rules, both implicit and explicit, represented in the films show Chinese women have been trapped in a 'prison' associated with dominant men, and kinship-related role and passive social and familial status which origin from the Confucian gender concepts. However, Chinese traditional gender stratification was challenged by the introduction of Western feminism, with gender concepts formally put on the table since the May Fourth Feminist Movement in 1919 (Li, 2000). Feminism has indeed altered Chinese women's image and social status in the contemporary Chinese film and television productions, where female self-consciousness as women have awakened and active. The depiction of women and their reaction toward oppression in society in the Republican films was noticeably passive and interdependent; society pushed women into the public but gave them little opportunities, respect, and rights for survival. In contrast the films and television series from the following eras of Mao, Post-Mao, and Post-2000 were shown the trend of generally increasing in Chinese women's social status, their active feminist cognition, and their rejection toward being the other in society. All the female protagonists in the eight films and television are conveyed their rejection of being the other but at different content due to their socio-political backgrounds. Female characters' rejection of being the other reflects their interaction with the family and society, where women break through the traditional female identity of male's appendant and gradually become independent subjects. Therefore, the features of women's representation in films and television of the four chronological eras are crucial to consider the trend of Chinese women in society.

This study shows that although female characters in the Republican and Mao eras films reject being positioned as the other in patriarchal Chinese society, they are comparatively passive and traditional in their familial roles toward their inferior status and rights. There are still some traditional Chinese women in the society that passively follow the patriarchal rules, but the young generation of Chinese women in post-2000 shows their strong will against gender inequality. Edwards (2000) argues that 'modern women' who were convinced as educated, independent, and patriotic had expanded in public spaces in China who became involved in the feminist movements for women's rights. Female figures that appear in public have become common with the increase of female populations in the workplace and school. However, the films of the Republicans mirror the dilemma of women's liberation in the period that feminist movements were placed under nationalist goals and male privileges, and women's familial roles and obligations emphatically appear in films. Therefore, I argue that female characters in the Republican eras raised the awareness of women for the first time and started rejecting the societal constraints. This was a crucial time with limited space for promoting feminism.

The Mao-era films show a dramatic increase in women's physical representation in the political and social sphere, and women's employment had gradually become common. The socialist state

exhibited significant involvement in and influence over the shaping of gender roles to validate its historical accomplishments in terms of revolution and liberation (Leung, 2003). Therefore, under the leadership and promotion of women's liberation from Chairman Mao and the Chinese Communist Party, women's awareness of female independence rapidly increased, that female's rejection of being the other in society became more obvious in films through the depiction of female protagonists' thoughts and behaviours that interacted with the society. Female characters' desire to seek occupation and fulfil their political goals reflects their aspiration of gaining equal rights in society. However, my examination of the political impacts of women's image in Mao-era film did not entirely reflect that optimal. The rationale can be interpreted by the dictatorship in the country that films be manipulated as a propaganda tool that delivered Maoist feminism to women to flexibly mobilize them for political purposes (Zheng, 1997). Moreover, the government's prohibition of women's feminine characteristics to eliminate bourgeois ideas (Yang & Yan, 2017) is an issue categorizing women and feminine characteristics into the 'other'. Therefore, the female characters in the Mao era do show they actively resisted being other, but their behaviour and through of feminism under the Communist Party promoted Maoist feminism that lacked unique female characteristics.

Feminism has taken root in Chinese society to a great extent, and the active representation of women seeking self-fulfilment and social independence is significant in post-Mao era films. Female images have become more widespread in the public eye, portraying diverse occupations, and female characters within families are relatively dominant compared to previous eras. Women's rejection of being relegated to secondary roles has become more voluntary and proactive, which is not solely promoted by the socialist purpose of dictatorship. The change in women's cognition of their female identity from the past to the Post-Mao era is attributed to the disciplined study of gender and women's issues. Li and Zhang (1994) demonstrate that the formal study of women and women's issues has enabled a large population of Chinese women to discover and re-associate their identities with family and society, breaking free from the precepts of Confucian and Maoist gender theories. Despite continued oppression towards women, their social and familial status has improved, so that female characters are now dominant in family and career. Women's rejection of being marginalized in society is also reflected in their determination and courage in obstacles during their life that women are no longer interdependent on their families but control their own life.

Chinese films and television series, extended to all media in the Post-2000 era, are explicitly a straightforward outcome of women's increased awareness of feminism and gender rights that women's rights and gender equality enhanced both in family and public. Moreover, female-oriented films and series showing women's capability, successful career women and a wise and respectful housewife has become popular in the Chinese film and television industry. Situ (2022)

argues that almost half of the television series made after 2010 are female-oriented, which centred on female characters in whole storytelling, which can be attributed to the large population of women who engaged in the urbanized living style, becoming the target audiences of film and television industries in post-2000 era. The high percentage of female-oriented themes in the Chinese film and television industry is distinctive evidence showing feminist concepts have made efficient changes in Chinese people's cognition of women and gender, even altering the film and television industry. The depiction of female characters is richer in Post-2000, and the complex gender relation in different familial and social backgrounds did not appear in earlier films. The storytelling of women mirrors diverse women's obstacles in their independent life in public and also accounts for their active rejection of being the other in contemporary society.

Despite each pair of samples of the four eras showing the trend of increasing women's social status and gender equality, I still argue that the deep-rooted women's familial obligation and oppression from Confucianism cannot be entirely eliminated. The rationale is that the collective culture gives women excessive responsibility in the household, and women's familial obligation of nurturing and reproduction for continuing the family lineage is crucial and unchangeable. Filial Piety (孝) is a significant component of the Chinese moral system and a central value in the culture that is clearly illustrated by an old Chinese saying: Of all the virtues, filial Piety comes first. (百善孝为先). Filial Piety contributed to the hierarchized familial order in which elders and men hold power over others (Ebrey, 2003, p.11). Therefore, an individual should not disobey their parents and ancestors' will and wish. Contemporary Chinese films show the new generation's active female awareness; however, the pressure from the parents to get daughters married and give birth for the purpose of continuing the familial lineage is heavy; films reflect that young women in contemporary society have a 'template' of life from the elder which rules them what to do in different life span. Young women are expected to get married and give birth before their thirties from their parents. The intangible pressure from filial Piety wound up young women in their daily life, leading a portion of women to give up their opportunities in public to fulfil filial Piety and continue the family lineage.

#### 5.4 The Underlyingly Changing in Contemporary Gender Relations of China

The change in gender representation and the focus on women have therefore created opportunities to get employment and become physically and financially independent in society. Prostitution is presented in both films from the earliest era—In the Republican era women in this period were hardly financially independent, and selling their bodies in exchange for money demonstrated the sexism and restriction women had to become independent in society. Men look down on women in the workplace and see women as objects, and others in a male-dominated society, which is still happening in the present, but women have become active and have the courage to fight against

oppression. However, the portrayal of prostitution entirely disappeared in Mao-era films, and men and women interacted well in the political sphere. The films deliver the message that the Chinese Communist Party's advocacy for women's liberation has successfully increased the presence of women in the workplace and political movement. 'Women hold up half the world' as stated by Chairman Mao, a statement that attached importance to women's power and emphasized women's labour values in the nation's development that the gender relation influenced political advocacy. The women hold equal rights to join the Communist Party and have opportunities as men to be the leader in the group. The appearance of female leaders in Mao-era films is solid evidence to show the increase in women's social status in society. The career woman figure is not unusual in the Post-Mao Post-2000 eras when women started seeking personal values in public. The diverse representation of women in different workplaces and the increase of women in initially male-dominated industries and occupations reflects the elimination of gender stereotypes and the enhancement of gender equality. The trends show that Confucian gender concepts of women who have to stay within the inner sphere have gradually been replaced by feminist concepts, and it is an optimal phenomenon that women's power and rights have gradually been seen and emphasized by the patriarchal society.

Moreover, in films and television from different eras, individuals' attitudes and behaviours in romantic relationship or marriage also shows cognitive changes in gender relations. Roseleen (2006) states that Chinese patriarchal society, originally from Confucianism, places women at the inferior level, which leads women to be seen as appendants to men. Women have no opportunities to receive education and show up in public because they are identified as a personal belonging of the family. Therefore, polygamy is common in Chinese history; a female role, who becomes a commodity, sell to men by the family to exchange money. In the films of the Republican era, single mother figures are represented by both female characters, which shows women hold limited initiative in romantic relationships and even abandoned by men for no reason after being pregnant. However, the imbalanced relationship vanished after the Republican era, and the female characters convey their denying of being the appendant of men through their desire to seek jobs and fulfil personal goals. Moreover, women are not only present in a passive nurturing role in films and television but are also decision-makers who hold the initiative in family and life.

In this study, an interesting phenomenon in gender relations was discovered in the recent eras of Post-Mao and Post-2000: male characters have been portrayed as hypocritical, selfish, and unfaithful to boost and highlight independent and feminist female figures. The purpose of portraying male characters negatively is to cater to the female-dominated audience in contemporary Chinese society. Although some male characters in the post-Mao era were depicted as selfish and incompetent, many positive male characters were aspirants in their occupations and faithful to their wives. However, male characters are commonly portrayed as either disloyal to

their female partner or incompetent but arrogant in occupation and life in post-2000 female-oriented films and television series. In both samples from the post-2000 era, all male protagonists are depicted as 'problematic' through their attitudes and behaviour in relationships and occupations. A clear opposition between women and men in Chinese female-oriented films and television has made women more reliable, loyal, and sincere in their interaction with men and society. Xiao (2021) demonstrates that radical feminism is gradually taking the place of feminism, placing men as the opposite of women and seeing them as the enemy. Radical feminism often meant that images of men in film and television has meant that the genders are often at odds. It could be argued that men are now unevenly or negatively represented in film and television, but this is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore.

However, the lack of positive male figures in contemporary Chinese female-oriented films and television exacerbates the binary opposition between the gender that generates a famous saying on Chinese social media: I argue that although women's rights and issues have been significant to examine and resolve in deep-rooted Confucian Chinese society in the past few decades; however, gender issues are still a serious problem.

## 5.5 Conclusion

The representation of Chinese women and gender relations in the eight films and television programmes of the Republican, Mao, Post-Mao, and Post-2000 eras show the social reality of patriarchy is constructed based on Confucian gender concepts and is gradually impacted by feminism. The ongoing themes of Chinese women's image and gender relations in the eight films and television from four eras show the deep-rooted Confucian gender ideologies destroying women's rights, whereby women suffered unequal treatment in the patriarchal society. Women's representation gradually becomes more active with more awareness and more diversity of women's experiences depicted over time.

As women's awareness grows and their social standing elevates, a significant transformation is unfolding within the Chinese film and television landscape. The evolution is evident in the shift of female audiences from mere participants to central consumers of these media forms. This transition reflects the changing dynamics of gender representation and content creation. In tandem with this shift, the content of Chinese films and television shows is undergoing a notable transformation to cater to the preferences and interests of women. Themes, narratives, and character portrayals are increasingly attuned to resonate with the female audience's evolving sensibilities, which shows a response to the changing dynamics of gender roles and perceptions in society.

Moreover, the digital age has provided a platform for Chinese women to amplify their voices and concerns. The empowerment facilitated by social media and online communities has emboldened women to speak out against the persisting inequalities in gender relations. Both within the digital realm and the physical world, Chinese women are courageously shedding light on the injustices faced by their gender and advocating for feminist principles.

In conclusion, the introduction of Western feminism into the deep-rooted Confucian Chinese society in the early twentieth century dramatically influences Chinese women, women's social status and gender cognition. The marriage policy and the feminist movement set out to promote women's liberation and gender equality, which were fundamental to comparative equality of gender in contemporary Chinese society. Even though Chinese feminism is different from Western feminism based on cultural and social construction, the samples illustrate that women have been represented as more equal and active. The selected eight films and television reflect the 'real' life in a specific period of Chinese society, with a solid connection to the psychological influences of Confucianism and feminism, which mirrors Chinese women's issues in the different periods of Chinese society.

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