

# *Reflection of Feminism Development in Female-Centered Chinese TV Series*

Lin Mao<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Social Work, Columbia University, 285 St. Nicholas Ave Apt 56, New York City, USA*  
a. *lm3507@columbia.edu*

*\*corresponding author*

**Keywords:** female representation, Chinese TV series, feminism

**Abstract:** Female-centered TV series have been a trend in China in the past few years. It seems like the portray of those heroines have contributed to improving female representation through media and promoting feminism. However, the objectification of women still exists and is deep-rooted. This paper is going to look at how the changes in female-centered Chinese TV series reflected the changes in feminism and female representation in real life. The research finds that although the main theme of this kind of series have changed from pursuing love to pursuing career, female images were still represented as to be saved and innocent.

## 1. Introduction

Female-centered TV series became a trend in China a few years ago. It is a form of TV shows that centered around the female lead and tell stories about her growth path (Wang, 2019). One of the most popular TV dramas in recent years, *Story of Yanxi Palace* (Yu, 2018), can be a representative. This form of TV series was a revolution because it was singular to narrate women's stories on screen, and they engross female audiences immediately. For instance, the average audience measurement of *Jade Palace Lock Heart* (Yu, 2011), a TV series that was released in 2011, reached 2.52 and ranked in second place that year, and about 66.3% of audiences were female. A total of 10 custom drama series were released from 2010 to 2011 (Lee, 2011). In recent years, eight out of ten of the most viewed TV series from 2005 to 2017 were female-centered series (CSM, 2017). The female-centered custom drama turned out to be prevalent once again since then. Albeit custom drama made a splash at the moment, the controversies about it never ceased. A centre conflict is that whether such series downplaying and objectifying women.

Female-centered TV series focus on the changes of the female lead struggles she went through, and her love story during the process of pursuing success. However, by success, these TV dramas incline to define it as a success in chasing love. These TV series either tell a story about men fight over a woman or a story about women succeed under men's assistance. It seems like they are trying to portray an inspirational woman, but instead, they deepen the idea that women are the accessories of men. They devalued women and ignored the effort women have made to succeed. Women are sentimental and weak compared to men in these shows, and these shows are normalizing these features. The criticizes and arguments about these shows never ceased, but it seems like the popularity of female-centered is not slowing down either. This problematic cognition about women

is not turning audiences down. Hence, our research question is, what is the relationship between female image in female-centered TV series and people's attitude toward women? Whether female-centered enhanced stereotypes toward or not? Is there a way for these shows to make changes?

## 2. Literature Review

Females tend to be downplayed in all media formats, and TV series, as one of the formats, contribute to creating stereotypical female images (Tankosic, Grbic, & Krivokapic, 2020). Mass media deny women's social existence, and they are either portrayed as the victim or underrepresented (Krijnen, 2020). Chinese TV series also have this same issue. The first Chinese TV series was on screen 1981 (Zhu, Keane, & Bai, 2008), and the theme has changed over time. There are six stages of the production of Chinese TV series, including live broadcasting, wasteland, revival, developing, television industrialization, and booming stage, which is the stage we are on now (Zheng, 2011). Female representation in Chinese media has also changed from "ideal revolutionary women" to "pursuer of woman's idea" (Chen, 2008).

In recent years, the increasing popularity of female-centered TV dramas in China has contributed to the change of female image on the screen (Wang, 2017). Today's female image is not limited to mother anymore, but they are still playing service roles for men and in a submissive position to male power and authority (Roberts, 2010). The definition of femininity in Chinese TV series has also changed from devoting to family and community life to economic independence. However, female characters in TV dramas still need to behave in a way that matches traditional gender hierarchies (Wang & Mihelj, 2019). In Chinese TV series, females' responsibilities are still within the household for most of the time, and their behaviors are circumscribed by the society and males' power (Gu et al., 2016). Even there indeed are changes in ways of portraying female, female characters are still depicted in men's perspective (Pei & Liu, 2013). Also, the increase of female status in TV series cannot represent that female status has also changed in real life. The statistics show that most viewers of female-centered TV dramas are female, which illustrates that the improvement of women's status in real life did not result from men's generosity. Instead, it is because of female's self-recognition (Cheng, 2019).

Mass media portrays women as problematic because our views of the environment are being shaped by media and forms of communication, including paintings, film, music, and other electronic media (Hansen, 2018). According to communication theory, mass media also affects society, beliefs, culture, and other areas of human activities (Perse & Lambe, 2016). For example, *the Handmaid's Tale* (Miller, 2017) and *Orange is the New Black* (Tannenbaum, 2013) are paragons. They were female-centered and at the same time, empowered women. However, the female representation in Chinese TV series enhanced the traditional values of women and reinforced the patriarchal structure of the society (Haijing, 2016), albeit those female traits exhibited in dramas is not a reflection of women in real life (Zhang, 2011). Television is a powerful form of propaganda (Pan, Shao & Xu, 2020), and female-centered drama can be tool to promote feminism.

## 3. Analysis

### 3.1. Improvement of Female-Centered Dramas

At first few years after custom drama started trending, the scenario was often around female lead's love life, and the theme was romance. Female leads usually have multiple admirers, who would fight against each other for her. There might also be another female character who was best friend with the female lead at first. However, this female character would almost certainly convert into a villain because of jealousy. Female leads, on the contrary, were gentle, kind, brave, and perfect. They

caught the male characters' attention because they were special compared with other female characters. The purpose of female-centered dramas was to narrate the growth of female characters. However, the perfect ending for them was usually ending up with their true love instead of achievement in a career.

In *Jade Palace Lock Heart*, Luo Qingchuan as a modern female who accidentally time-traveled back to the Qing dynasty attracted four male characters. She had the privilege at that time because, as a time-traveler, she already knew that part of history and had contemporary. Her privilege made her unique and assisted her in overcoming several hindrances. However, her privilege did not support her to make tremendous achievements. It only served as characters that enticed men. Men would show up when she came across troubles and help her evade them. Her growth in this story was found out whom she loved the most and lived a happy life with him. These dramas tend to weaken female's values and abilities. Females' success often accomplished with the assistance of males. They are female-centered on the outside, but they still interpret women under male-gaze. They supposed to be a tool to break gender stereotypes, but they are nowhere close.

Nevertheless, with the development of the TV industry and increase the acknowledgment of female values, the content of female-centered dramas improved a lot in the past few years. The theme has transformed from a romance story into ability progress. *The Empress of China* (Fan), which came out in 2014, described the story of Wu Zetian, the first female Emperor in Chinese history. The storyline targeted on how Wu Zetian became Emperor from a nameless adolescent. It acknowledged Wu's achievements. Her success was not defined as ending up with a man this time.

The last episode of this show depicted Wu's life after her husband died. She took over the throne even though there were numerous dissenters. There was a scene in this episode where one of the ministers tried to convince Wu not to take the throne because there was no precedent for a female emperor in Chinese history. He said Wu had gained everything she wanted and was controlling the country already. Thereby, it was superfluous for her to hold the enthronement. Wu countered that she was aware of all the discontentment, and they only existed because she was a woman. She then prevailed over all the disagreements and succeeded to the throne. It was challenging for women to make achievements in that historical background because of women's low status. Nonetheless, Wu not only succeeded, but she was also the one and only female Emperor in Chinese history and set a foundation for the refulgence of the Tang Dynasty. She was an excellent example of feminism, even though this concept does not exist back then.

Whereas, Luo's story started with she compromised with a set-up marriage. It ended up with Luo broke up with her fiancé and waiting for the love of her life to time travel back to modern society. Luo was supposed to take over her father's antique store. However, her knowledge about antiques and her management skills did not present in the show. The show did not discuss how this time-travel experience was going to influence her career, even though time traveling back to the ancient time was a fantastic learning opportunity for an antique store owner. Both *Jade Palace Lock Heart* and *The Empress of China* were representations of female-centered at their times. There were plenty of shows that emulated them. The portrayal of female characters has reformed slightly. The focus is not only on their love life anymore. Instead, they add in women's potentials in career.

## 3.2. Defects that Never Changed

### 3.2.1. Women are to be Saved

It is critical to recognize the improvements female-centered drama series have made, but this is certainly not enough, and debates still exist. The primary concern is that female characters' successes are still relying on males' assistance. In *the Empress of China*, Wu became Emperor after all the difficulties she went through, which consist of history. She had three admirers who would

always be there for her. For instance, when the augur told Li Shimin, the second Emperor of Tang, father of Li Zhi, and Wu's first husband, there was a woman whose last name was Wu and suggested Li Shimin kill Wu Zetian. However, Li Shimin refused the suggestion and protected Wu. Another male character, Li Mu, who was Wu's best friend since childhood, even broke into the jail and rescued Wu. In the very last scene of *The Empress of China*, Wu told her grandson that she dreamed about everyone who was part of her life last night, including her parents, her friends, and her enemies. The only person who was not there was her husband. The way they narrate the story hid Wu's abilities to solve problems. She did not need to put effort when she was in trouble, because there would always be a man show up to save her. Characters' problem-solving skills could be a perfect opportunity to show their ability. However, when they have to depend on other people's assistance, their abilities are weakened. It also delivers a message that women could only overcome difficulties with the help of men.

Women rely on men is a shared trait in female-centered dramas. It exists in both *Jade Palace*, *Lock Heart* and *The Empress of China*. It also is presented in female-centered dramas after *The Empress of China*. *The Legend of Mi Yue* (Cao), which was released in 2015, and *Nothing Gold Can Stay* (Zhao), which was on screen in 2017, are also female-centered dramas based on history. Mi Yue and Zhou Ying are the leading characters in these two dramas. They were incredible women in Chinese history. However, both these shows assigned several male characters who would save them when they were in trouble. The way these shows narrate stories not only twisted the history but also provide the audience with the idea that women are to be saved. They are telling stories in a man's world, where women are still appendants to men. They praise women's achievements, but, in the meantime, they express the point that women cannot live without men.

Female-centered drama series want to increase the theatricality of the show and inform the audience about female characters' enchantment by portraying women's love life. Whereas, the definition of women's charm is not attractiveness toward men. It is a comprehensive concept, and men are the ones who can assess it. Also, women are capable of making accomplishments without men. In fact, these three historical characters, Wu Zetian, Mi Yue, and Zhou Ying, succeeded on their own. Their achievements were not gained through men's assistance. Even though female-centered drama provided a space for the story of women's success, they are also using feminism as a veil to cover the fact that they still objectify and devalue women.

### 3.2.2. Kind and Innocent as Female Leads' Personalities

Female-centered dramas are fond of portraying female lead as innocent, kind, and do not want to compete with others. They are unique compared with other female characters, and this is one of the reasons they attract male characters. For instance, in reality, Wu was ambitious and talented. Even though Li Zhi, one of the Emperors of Tang and Wu's second husband, indeed provided her assistance, the reason for Wu's successes was her abilities, courage, and her insights. She would do anything to conquer her purposes. One of the most significant controversies about Wu's govern in history was her cruelty. However, the show depicted her as a kind and innocent woman who will never hurt anyone. Even when people trapped her, she still wanted to forgive them. She would only be cruel when she had no choice. She did not want to make massive accomplishments in the first place, and there was often a person who pushed her to the next step. Almost all other female characters in this show hated Wu and wanted to murder her. Her best friend, Xu Hui, converted to a villain and set her up because of jealousy. Albeit there were many people trapped murdered Wu, she would never hurt others. This TV series either found a reason for Wu's cruelty or let someone else be the brutal person. In history, Wu killed her own kid and shifted the responsibility to Empress Wang to eliminate Wang. However, this behavior is undoubtedly violated Wu's personality in the show. So, they let Princess Gaoyang be the one who killed Wu's kid in the show.

In these dramas, female lead cannot be evil. They also cannot hurt others first even when they know there are potential threats. They have to wait for the villain to set them up several times before they take action. The only reason for them to be tough on other people is what the villains have done is beyond endurance. In *Empresses in the Palace*, the primary reason for Zhen Huan attracted the Emperor because she looked like the Emperor's first wife, who has passed away. Whereas, Zhen Huan pretended to be sick to avoid the Emperor's attention and favor is also fundamental. Unlike all other imperial concubines who compete with each other for Emperor's favor, Zhen was the only one who tried to avoid Emperor. After she run into Emperor accidentally, they fell in love with each other, and Zhen became Emperor's favorite. The favor Zhen got made other women jealous, and they wanted to murder her. Zhen was aware of the danger she was facing, but she never thought about hurt others. Even after she realized she needed to fight back instead of forbear, she still did not hurt others intentionally. She only used tricks to make the Emperor aware of what others have done to her and made them suffer the consequences.

These TV series depicted female lead in a tedious way. Female lead cannot be ambitious and manipulative in the first place. There has to be someone to compel them. Even though human nature is complicated, female lead can only be innocent. Complicated human nature is also why the villains are also adorable for audiences in these shows. Villains' flaws are more realistic and consistent with human nature. However, female leads' personalities match with people's, or more accurately, men's assumption of perfect women. These female-centered TV series aimed to tell stories about females, but since the majority of producers behind the scenes are men, stereotypes about women are apparent in these shows.

#### 4. Conclusions

Television, as one of the most prevalent media, is a fascinating tool that people use to deliver and derive information. Mass media affect human life in the form of belief, value, knowledge, and other areas. When TV series attract viewers, they are passing the core values to audiences. Turing the other way around, the reason these TV dramas attract people is their values match audiences' expectations. Female-centered TV dramas is an example of this supposition. These shows presented women in unrealistic ways and defined perfect women, which are women who are vulnerable, innocent, harmless, and relying on men. Whereas, the popularity of female-centered TV series is increasing alongside with critiques.

From *Jade Palace Lock Heart* to *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, the way they portray women barely changed. If we put aside the background of each story, the growth paths of the female lead in these shows can be merged. They attract men with their unique personalities, changed from having no desire to compete because of wanting to fight back calumniates, and then achieve their goals with the help of men, either love or career. If we only discuss the endings of these shows, we could conclude that the improvement of female-centered TV dramas indicates the increasing awareness of feminism. However, every part other than the finish remains the same and devalues women. They avoid women's efforts in the process of pursuing success but emphasize men's roles in it. These dramas are feminism outside but patriarchal inside.

In these female-centered shows, women's abilities tend to be ignored. Wu Zetian governed the country and set a foundation for the revival of Tang because of her political competences. Zhou Ying was one of the legend merchants in Chinese history because of her gifted business skills, and women today are making attainments and fortunes through hard work. There will be benefactors in everyone's life, but they are not necessarily men. The growing path of women is not as dramatic as shown in the TV shows, and women's exertions need to be recognized. However, the stereotypical understanding of women not only exists in TV shows but also typical in real life.

It is not rare for people to judge successful women and comment that their successes are coming from men. However, we barely hear analogous feedback when it comes to men. We read posts about the definition of perfect women, thin, long-hair, big eyes, perfect smiles, and the list goes on. Nonetheless, there are barely standards for perfect men. These stereotypes of women are exposing on screen, and TV shows re-enhanced these ideas. Producers are not putting afford into creating a new trend. Instead, they tried to increase viewers with the type of TV series that already gratified audiences (Xing, 2017). People's worldview is manipulating how producers make TV shows. At the same time, television, as one of the most popular media, is influencing how people understand this world. It is the TV series' responsibility to stop forming gender stereotypes and spreading the correct value. It is also vital for people to recognize the value of women. Thus, expunging the stereotypical concept of perfect women from the screen and real life is the key to producing a veritable female-centered show.

## References

- [1] Wang, H. (2019). *Da nv zhu ju: xu qiu re chao hou geng xu leng qu chen dian* [Female-Centered TV Dramas: They Need to Slow Down After Growing Rapidly]. *TV Guide*. Retrieved from <http://www.cnki.com.cn/Article/CJFD Total-ZNDS201905014.htm>
- [2] Yu, Z. (Producer). (2018). *Story of yanxi palace* [Television series]. Hengdian, China: Huayu Film & iQiyi
- [3] Yu, Z. (Producer). (2011). *Jade palace lock heart* [Television series]. Zhejiang, China: Hunan ETV Culture Media, Yuzheng Studio, & H&R Century Pictures
- [4] Lee, H. (2011). *Zen yi ge dou zi liao de* [Competitions among custom dramas]. *CSM Media Research*. Retrieved from [csm.com.cn/Content/2016/11-11/1055263355.html](http://www.csm.com.cn/Content/2016/11-11/1055263355.html).
- [5] CSM (2017). *2005-2017 nian dian shi ju shou shi lv top 20 Ren Min de Ming Yi pai ming di wu* [In the Name of the People ranked No.5 in the most viewed TV series from 2015 to 2017]. *TVTV.HK*. Retrieved from <http://www.tvtv.hk/archives/5106.html>
- [6] Tankosic, M. M., Grbic, A. V., & Krivokapic, Z. (2020). *The Marginalization and Exploitation of Women in Media Industry*. In *Globalization and Its Impact on Violence Against Vulnerable Groups* (pp. 75-94). IGI Global.
- [7] Krijnen, T. (2020). *Gender and media*. *The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and Communication*, 1-9.
- [8] Zhu, Y., Keane, M., & Bai, R. (Eds.). (2008). *TV drama in China (Vol. 1)*. Hong Kong University Press.
- [9] Zheng, Z. Y. (2011). *Stereotyping of women's images portrayed in prime time Chinese TV series from 1979 to 2008: Has the picture changed over time?* *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*. 12247.
- [10] Chen, Y. (2008). *From ideal women to women's ideal: Evolution of the female image in chinese feature films, 1949-2000*. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 14(3), 97-129,140.
- [11] Wang, J. (2017). *Nv xing ba ping---dian shi ju "da nv zhu" xian xiang qian xi* [Female on screen---Analysis the phenomenon of female-center TV series]. *Broadcast Television*.
- [12] Roberts, R. (2010). *Gender psychology in the women of The Red Lantern in its evolution from model opera to soap opera*. *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, 12(1), 93-109.
- [13] Wang, Y., & Mihelj, S. (2019). *A socialist superwoman for the new era: Chinese television and the changing ideals of femininity*. *Feminist Media Histories*, 5(3), 36-59.
- [14] Gu, Z.J., Chen, Y.X., Meng, L.G., Gao, J.B., & Yue, T. (2016). *Deconstruction and Construction of Female Characters in TV Series Adapted from Literary Masterpieces: A Case Study of Red Sorghum*. *Journalism Evolution*, (1), 11.
- [15] Pei, X. & Liu, L. (2013). *Xiao fei yu jing zhong jia ting lun li ju de nv xing zhu yi jian gou he ce lv* [Feminism construction in soap operas under consumers' perspective]. *Journal of Nayang Normal University*, (2), 41-46.
- [16] Cheng, Y. (2019). *Awakening of subject consciousness: the analysis of three young main different types of Chinese female representations based on TV series "All is well"*. In *2nd International Conference on Humanities Education and Social Sciences (ICHESS 2019)*. Atlantis Press.
- [17] Hansen, A. (2018). *Environment, media and communication*. Routledge.
- [18] Perse, E. M., & Lambe, J. (2016). *Media effects and society*. Routledge.
- [19] Miller, B. (Executive Producer). (2017). *The handmaid's tale* [Television series]. USA: Daniel Wilson Productions, Inc., The Littlefield Company, White Oak Pictures, & MGM Television
- [20] Tannenbaum, N. K. (Producer). (2013). *Orange is the new black* [Television series]. New York: Tilted Productions & Lionsgate Television

- [21] Haijing, T. U. (2016). *From The Good Wife to Hot Mom!: An Ideological Analysis of American and Chinese Motherhood on TV*. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 25(2).
- [22] Zhang, J. (2011). *The feminist interpretation of "a beautiful daughter-in-law era"*. Xi'an Jiaotong Univerdity.
- [23] Pan, J., Shao, Z., & Xu, Y. (2020). *The Effects of Television News Propaganda: Experimental Evidence from China*. Available at SSRN.
- [24] Fan, B.B. (Producer). (2014). *The empress of China [Television series]*. Hengdian, China: Fan Bingbing Studio, China Film Group Corporation, Zhejiang Talent Television & Film, Evergrande Film Co., & Duzhe Publishing Media Co.
- [25] Cao, P. (Producer). (2015). *The legend of Mi Yue [Television series]*. China: Dongyang Flowers Film and Television Culture Co., LTD., Ruyi Xinxin Pictures, & Xianggela Film and Television Culture Dissemination Co., LTD.
- [26] Zhao, Y. (Producer). (2017). *Nothing gold can stay [Television series]*. China: HS Entertainment Group Incorporated
- [27] Xing, T. (2017). *Why today's Chinese TV dramas are insulting to women*. *Sixth Tone: Fresh Voices from Today's China*. Retrieved from <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1000110/why-todays-chinese-tv-dramas-are-insulting-to-women>