

A Probe into the Representation of Female Images in the Documentary on Fertility

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Abstract: Fertility has become a hot topic in China. At the same time, some documentaries reflecting women's fertility problems began to appear. With the help of reproduction theory, this paper analyzes and interprets the female images presented by birth documentary from three aspects: reproduction objects, reproduction ways and reproduction reasons. It is found that the creators of this kind of documentary are mostly based on feminist discourse and the concept of life care, and through the use of female body symbols and suffering narration, they reproduce the images of contemporary women when dealing with fertility problems.

1. Introduction

Since the “comprehensive two-child policy” in 2016, the problem of low fertility rate has become a significant problem in China's social development. The data of the seventh national census in 2021 shows that the total fertility rate of women of childbearing age in China is 1.3 in 2020, which is already at a low level. At the same time, some documentaries with the theme of reflecting women's fertility problems began to appear, such as Birth Gate, Wonderful Egg Birth and so on. These documentaries vividly record the stories of different families around fertility, reproduce the state of contemporary women in the face of fertility problems and arouse people's thinking. With the help of reproduction theory, this paper analyzes and interprets the female images presented by birth documentaries.

2. Female Reproductive Image and Reproduction Theory

In the traditional cultural context, fertility is a taboo in speech and writing. After the baptism of the new culture “Mr. De” and “Mr. Sai”, fertility has become a topic that can be openly discussed. In the literary works and news reports of this period, the descriptions of women's childbearing mostly put women in the danger of childbirth, creating a fierce conflict between individual value (maternal life) and family well-being (continuation of incense), thus calling for breaking the patriarchal clan system family ethical order^[1]. For example, Ba Jin's novel “Home” exquisitely and skillfully reproduces that Rui Jue was forced to move out of the house to give birth because of the funeral of his father and ancestors, and finally lost his life in production. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the society tends to be stable, and people's fertility desire has been improved. The government has also adopted a loose birth policy, even following the example of the Soviet Union to encourage and support birth. During this period, women were portrayed as “omnipotent family heroes” by the news media, while sterilization was regarded as a selfish move against ethics. After the Cultural Revolution, the central government began to attach importance to family planning, and in 1982, family planning was defined as a basic national policy. Most of the literary works of this period meticulously reproduce the lasting game of “stay and flow” and “birth and prohibition” between rural fertility desire and national policy restrictions, and construct a traumatic personality landscape with disease and madness as the main symptoms^[2]. Fertility women are both violators and victims of the family planning policy in these novels. For example, Bei Mei, a super-living girl in Xiaolv Zheng's “Journey to the West”, hid in the cellar of “T” home to avoid being chased by the family planning working group, and finally died of darkness, lack of oxygen and extreme psychological fear in the cellar. In 2013, China fully implemented the policy of “two

children alone”, in 2016, and in 2021, China implemented the policy that a couple can have three children. With the loosening of the birth policy, the rapid development of society and the influence of feminist thoughts, the image of women's birth has changed greatly compared with the past, but the academic research on contemporary women's birth image has not yet started. The birth documentary focuses on the topic of women's birth, taking the real story of women's birth as the material, and makes extensive and in-depth discussions on women, family, society and other aspects. Analyzing the image of women's birth in the birth documentary helps us to understand the present situation of women's birth in China and the deep-seated problems that exist, and provides some thoughts on how the media should further shape the image of women's birth.

Reproduction refers to reappearance, portrait description and objective presentation of something. This concept is used to describe how to put different symbols together, so that complex and abstract concepts can be understood and meaningful. Manufacturing practice in this sense is a basic cognitive process. Stuart Hall, a British scholar of cultural studies, believes that reproduction is not a simple copy of reality, but a process of selection and construction in essence, which reflects Hall's constructivist interpretation of reproduction theory. Based on the above discussion, this paper discusses the reproduction of female images in fertility documentaries from three aspects of reproduction theory: first, “reproduction objects”, summarizing and summarizing the characteristics of female images in such documentaries; The second is “the way of representation”, which analyzes the basic ways of representation of female images in documentaries and understands how female images are represented by the media; The third is “the reason of reproduction”, which explains the deep mechanism that affects the reproduction of female images in documentary.

3. The Representation Object: Dependent Women and Independent Women.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* holds that only a woman's own independent work can guarantee her true independence. With the development of society, the definition of women's independence is becoming more and more diverse. Huang Jinhua and Shi Tianyue believe that independence is different from different people, and the key is that they can have a clear understanding of themselves among multiple identities such as mother, wife and professional women, so as to firmly position themselves in life^[3]. Dependent women are relative to independent women. Therefore, the independent women mentioned in this paper refer to women who are economically independent and have personal subjective will, while the dependent women refer to women who are not economically independent or have no personal subjective will.

3.1 Dependent on Women

Dependent women's procreation in documentary is often influenced by family and traditional procreation concept. In the documentary *Shengmen*, Zeng Xianchun was pregnant five times in a row and had two daughters. In order to have another boy, she was pregnant again, scarred her uterus, ruptured her uterus, placenta implantation, and finally had a premature son. Zeng Xianchun's husband said, “We have to have a boy in rural areas”. Zeng Xianchun said: “If you don't have a son, others will laugh at you. We rural people have no quality. If they swear, he will scold you for not having this or that.” Yang Yuan, the producer of *Wonderful Egg Life*, once said in the documentary that many rural women told her that she could raise her head in the village as long as she had a child. In his research, Li Yinhe pointed out that fertility itself is a pillar of villagers' values, which is not only a heartfelt belief, but also a criterion for evaluating others.

Dependence on women in birth documentaries is influenced by traditional ideas and internalized into personal values. In the view of dependent women, one of the most important values is fertility. If she has children, especially sons, she can win self-esteem and respect from others. The essence of this kind of taking having children as the purpose and as an embodiment of one's own life value is “instrumentalization” of birth, which is the alienation of life value. The fertility documentary describes a lot of rural women's psychological pressure because they can't bear children or have no sons, and even sacrifice their health to bear children. It shows us that dependent women are still

influenced by the traditional fertility concept and pay a huge price for it, which profoundly reflects the confinement and oppression of women as fertility tool.

3.2 Independent Women

The independent women presented in the fertility documentary mainly include professional women, Dink and single-fertility women. The documentary shows the dilemma that professional women need to take care of both work and children, and sets Dink and single-fertility women as examples of fertility freedom, calling on women to freely choose fertility.

3.2.1 Professional Women in the Cracks

Women's career choice of childbearing is no longer due to the oppression of the outside world, but more based on their own personal needs. However, this does not mean that they have been able to give birth equally and freely, and they are also facing their own fertility problems. As professional women, if they choose to have children, they need to face the dual pressures of work and child care. How to balance these two aspects at the same time becomes a problem that they must face. Xiao Junhua believes that the socialization of production and the professionalization of labor enable women as individual workers to get rid of their families and rely on selling their own labor force to survive. However, the society has not fully affirmed and recognized the special labor value of women in fertility from the economic and other value forms, which makes modern working women, especially knowledge-based and career-oriented women, always in an abnormal state of caring for one thing and losing another. And this is the birth dilemma faced by independent women. In the current social environment, dual identities make them need to make double efforts.

3.2.2 Dink and Single Women

Dink and the women who choose single birth are another kind of independent women presented in the birth documentary. Dink's sociological formal term is voluntary infertility. Because encouraging fertility is a social norm that has been shared by human beings until now, being a parent is often regarded as a normal stage of life development^[4]. Dink women have broken the traditional fertility norms and made their own choices in fertility. Single women's fertility refers to the reproductive behavior of unmarried women who are in accordance with the law and have not yet entered into marriage with the help of assisted reproductive technology, which breaks the traditional fertility norms based on marriage in China. By showing the happy life of Dink and single mothers, the birth documentary tries to tell women that there are still many choices in childbirth, and these choices can also lead to happiness. Although the birth documentary set Dink and single mothers as examples of birth freedom, it should be clear that these two behaviors are not universal to some extent. Dink is the choice of a few people, and the reproductive rights of single women are not guaranteed by the corresponding laws in China. The single mothers shown in the documentary are all operated abroad, which requires certain economic strength. For ordinary women, these two choices are of no reference significance, and they are still struggling in real life.

4. The Way of Reproduction: Symbol and Narrative

By telling the story of women's fertility, the fertility documentary mainly shows us the image of women who are the victims of fertility. Behind this image generation, it corresponds to the unique reproduction way of the topic of female fertility. Therefore, the following will analyze the symbolic use and narrative mode of female images in documentary, and explore the main ways to reproduce female reproductive images, in response to how female images as the victims of fertility are reproduced by the media.

4.1 Symbol Application: Painful Female Body

“Only those bodies that can be both productive and tamed are a useful force.” Foucault's words reveal that the human body, especially the contemporary female body, is no longer a pure and natural existence. To a certain extent, the female body is a symbolic embodiment of the unequal

fertility view engraved on the flesh. What is hidden under the female body symbol is the construction of gender inequality cognition from the family, society and other life contexts. In the birth documentary *Wonderful Egg Birth*, women who choose assisted reproductive technology, their bodies are ill and incomplete in the social definition of healthy women's bodies, and they need frequent injections, taking medicine, taking eggs and implanting embryos ... The uterus and ovaries were originally a part of women's bodies, but with the intervention of cold medical equipment, they feel out of control of their bodies, and their anxiety and self-frustration are increasing day by day. They In the documentary "Birth Gate", the female body has also become an important symbol of its application, and the pain suffered by the parturient in the process of labor and operation is directly shown to the audience through the lens.

The birth documentary is full of scenes about women's bodies being destroyed. In these scenes, women's bodies are controlled and subdued, pessimistic and passive bodies. Women's physical and psychological pain caused by childbirth has become a unique symbol, and women have become the victims of childbirth.

4.2 Narrative Structure: Suffering Narrative and Individual Narrative

From pregnancy to childbirth, women are suffering from great depression both physically and psychologically, especially during childbirth, the hard process of women's physical tearing and bleeding can't be described in words. Every pregnancy and birth of women is a physical catastrophe^[5]. The birth of a child can lead to another kind of longer-term suffering, that is, the hardship of raising. This is because for women, fertility will not only bring about physiological changes, but also bring about changes in women's status and responsibilities in sociology. The documentary film on birth theme uses the mode of suffering narrative to tell about the suffering experienced by women during pregnancy, childbirth and upbringing, so as to show the sacrifices made by women in the birth process. Documentary creators show the audience the image of women as the victims of childbirth by showing the suffering and pressure that women suffer in the process of childbirth.

In the face of the fertility topic that has attracted much attention from the society, the creator adopted a narrative perspective from the micro-individual, and chose to reflect on the social problems with the fertility stories of ordinary women. This narrative perspective makes the original abstract public issues clear and sensible, and makes the thoughts and intentions that creators want to convey appear in individual narratives. Through the connection between "big" and "small", it is helpful for the audience to feel the pain and sacrifice of women in the patriarchal cultural order in the occasional, different, individual and diversified stories of women's fertility.

5. The Reason of Reappearance: Feminism and Life Care.

The female image in the birth documentary is not only the result of the unique reproduction way, but also the female birth image selected and constructed by the creator based on the personal subjective intention and the ideological position of the documentary era, through the selection of characters, the understanding, judgment and induction of events, editing and so on. Therefore, with the help of the concept and framework of power discourse, this paper will analyze the deep ideological pedigree in fertility documentary and explore the reasons that affect the reproduction of female images.

5.1 Feminist Discourse

Feminists believe that reproductive behavior is a natural human right of women, and when, how and how to give birth are basic rights of women. However, in real life, due to the influence of family, society and other factors, women can't enjoy the right of reproductive freedom, and even are "bound" by reproductive institutions. The documentary production team regards the birth documentary as an important channel for women's voices. On the one hand, it hopes to improve the "aphasia" status of women, especially marginal women, and strive for more rights and interests for

them. On the other hand, it is expected to arouse women's self-consciousness and realize self-salvation.

In birth documentaries, producers often speak for women based on their personal female identity and feminist standpoint. At the beginning of the first episode of *Fantastic Egg Birth*, Yang Yuancao talked about the fact that shooting the birth theme has a lot to do with her personal birth experience, and the documentary was named because she saw on the Internet that “a woman who can't give birth to a child is a chicken who can't lay an egg”. She thinks this is a very backward concept of fertility, and she wants to resolutely oppose it on behalf of all women. During the filming process, Yang Yuancao also chose to speak directly for women many times. Wen Xia was driven out of the house by her husband because of the second abortion of the implanted embryo, but she chose to divorce but was claimed by her husband for the 600,000 yuan spent on assisted reproduction. Yang Yuancao went to talk with Wen Xia's husband Xiaoding. During the conversation, Yang Yuancao spoke for Wen Xia from the standpoint of women. She told Xiaoding that Wen Xia really loved him and married him, and her body suffered a lot to illustrate Wen Xia.

In the documentary, a large number of women think that it is their duty to give birth to children, while those who can't give birth are useless, and they become the bonders of the concept of fertility tools. By telling these women's birth stories, the production team criticizes the persecution of women by traditional birth concepts, hoping to arouse women's self-awareness and help women correctly understand their personal values, so as to complete self-salvation.

5.2 Life Care

Among the rights and interests given to natural persons by law, the right to life is paramount, and the essence of life care is embodied in the care for life and respect for the right to life. The documentary production team has carried out the life care for women's fertility into the creative process, which constitutes the creative keynote of the fertility documentary. This kind of human nature observation with temperature makes the documentary convey warm and solid strength, and also makes the great pain borne by women during childbirth pay attention to by the society.

In modern society, women's birth is still regarded as a private matter within the family, and the specific birth process of women is still avoided. The production team of the documentary “*Shengmen*” chose to face the process of women's birth directly, and showed the audience the physical hardships that women suffered in this special stage of pregnancy and childbirth. They aimed the lens at the obstetrics department of Wuhan Central South Hospital, and through showing the difficulty of admission of pregnant women, birth complications, life and death dilemma on the operating table, they repeatedly impacted the noumenon of “mother”, truly reappeared the hardships and hardships of women's birth, and even the struggle of the war between man and nature, relentlessly unveiled the veil of the truth of birth, and let the world see the birth suffering that women have suffered for thousands of years. At the same time, let the audience see the hard-won birth of life, call on the society to care for the physical and mental health of women's fertility, and highlight the strong life consciousness of the production team.

6. Conclusion

Based on the feminist standpoint and the concept of life care, fertility documentary producers use female body symbols and suffering narration to portray women as the victims of fertility. This is conducive to awakening women's subjective consciousness and revealing women's fertility problems to the society. However, it is worth pointing out that the topic of fertility is a complex social problem. It is one-sided to show only the difficulties and dilemmas of women's fertility. Too much favor of shaping the image of the victim will make it difficult to reach the essence of the problem and unable to provide or guide solutions to public issues.

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